

Founded on Failures

Acts 9:1-20

John 21:1-19

“He asked, ‘Who are you, Lord?’ The reply came, ‘I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.’” Acts 9:5-6

“He said for the third time, ‘Simon, son of John, do you love me?’ Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, ‘Do you love me?’” John 21:17

May marks the beginning of a month or two when sons and daughters, nieces and nephews, grandchildren and even grandparents walk across a stage to shake the hand of the principal or the president, receive a diploma and finally flip that little tassel from right to left on their rented mortarboards. Beyond the pomp and circumstance, what I love most about this season is listening to commencement addresses. To be sure, many are simply twenty minutes of banal advice, but now and again you come across a few words of hard won wisdom.

I found those few words this week in an address given over a decade ago to the Harvard Class of 2008 by J.K. Rowling of *Harry Potter* fame. After thanking the requisite dignitaries for the weeks of fear and nausea she endured at the thought of giving a commencement address to Harvard brainiacs and so for the weight she lost in the process, Rowling invited graduates to consider “The Fringe Benefits of Failure and the Importance of Imagination” through the lens of her own life. Seven years after graduating from college and long before the publication of *Harry Potter*, Rowling said she had, by any conventional standard, failed on an “epic scale.” In sum, her exceptionally short-lived marriage had imploded, leaving her jobless, a lone parent and “as poor as it is possible to be in modern Britain, without being homeless.... [B]y every usual standard,” Rowling says, “I was the biggest failure I knew.”

By any biblical standard, the same could be said of Peter and Paul. In John’s Gospel, Peter is a stalwart disciple until he is not! Simon is the first, along with his brother Andrew, to follow Jesus. He is renamed “Cephas” by Jesus, meaning Rock, and immediately sets out to live up to his name. When others cease from following Jesus early on, Peter pipes up and says, “Lord, to whom shall we go? *You* have the words of eternal life.” After first refusing to have his feet washed by Jesus, he then asks Jesus to wash not only his feet but his hands and his head. The same night he tells Jesus that he will lay down his life for him, only to be told by Jesus that he will deny him three times before the night is over. Undaunted by this prediction, Peter boldly cuts off the ear of the High Priest’s slave when the soldiers and religious leaders arrive to arrest Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. Then he follows his arrested Lord into the High Priest’s courtyard where...he denies him three times. You can imagine Peter saying with Rowling of himself that night, “I was the biggest failure I knew.”

Saul had also been considered a great success in his community until he was not. As he described himself to the church in Philippi, he was “circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.” But as he was on the way to Damascus to bind Christians and bring them to Jerusalem for trial, literally in a flash of blinding light this man who was “advanced in Judaism beyond many among [his] people of the same age,” found himself completely in the dark and utterly dependent on the men who were traveling with him. Looking back on who he was before he was baptized, you can imagine Paul saying of himself, with Rowling, “I was the biggest failure I knew.”

Why, I began to wonder, had Christ founded the church on failures?

Because, in the first place according to Rowling, failure strips away the inessential, the inessential being precisely what we are taught to think is so essential for a successful life by well-meaning parents and status-conscious peers, by degree-granting institutions as well as judgmental religious communities. In an instant, the successful persons Peter and Paul believed themselves to be, the persons they had worked hard to become in the eyes of peers, had been stripped away. I think it likely that failure has done the same to each of us. For as Rowling goes on to say, “it is impossible to live without failing at something, unless you live so

cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all—in which case, you fail by default.” Think back on a time—or maybe that time is this very moment—when failure stripped away the inessentials of the person you had worked so hard to become in the eyes of your peers or your parents or your professors. “That period of my life was a dark one,” Rowling confessed. “I had no idea then how far the tunnel extended, and for a long time, any light at the end of it was a hope rather than a reality.” Yet looking back, and Rowling does not put it exactly this way, had she really succeeded at all these other things, the things that counted for success in British society, she might never have found the determination to live the life given her by God to live.

In the second place, because of her epic failure, Rowling says, “I stopped pretending to myself that I was anything other than what I was and began to direct all my energy into finishing the only work that mattered to me.” That work was writing. “I was set free,” she tells these privileged and soon to be well-connected graduates, “because my greatest fear (the fear of failure) had been realized, and I was still alive, and I still had a daughter whom I adored, and I had an old typewriter and a big idea.” Likewise you could say that failure freed Peter from the need to pretend he was the most zealous disciple Jesus ever could have called into service. Failure freed Paul from the need to pretend he was the most righteous under the law. Failure freed you from what? Going way beyond what Rowling would say of herself, failure frees us from the need to pretend we are anything other than sinners saved by God’s grace, creatures made in God’s image, earthen vessels whose treasure belongs to God.

In the third place, Rowling told these graduates on the way up that “Rock bottom became the solid foundation on which I rebuilt my life.” I would edit that sentence for Peter and Paul and you and me to say that rock bottom is where the God, who is our sure foundation, finds us finally vulnerable enough to be loved into living a whole new life, a life that begins at the font and is nourished at the table. Whether on the beach after breakfast when Jesus asks this failed fisherman and failed disciple if he loves him or sitting in the dark in the house of Judas on a street called Straight in Damascus when Ananias enters and lays hands on this blind persecutor of the church, both Peter and Paul come face to face, at rock bottom, with the depth of their need for the love and mercy and forgiveness they could not give themselves. How else, I began to wonder, but by failing and being forgiven, could Peter and Paul, can you and I, be given the sense of urgency we need into order to proclaim God’s love, its breadth and length and height and depth, to a world at rock bottom?

Finally Rowling turns to the importance of imagination, a gift failure gives to you and me, in particular, for the sake of the church’s mission. “In [imagination’s] arguably most transformative and revelatory capacity,” Rowling concludes, “it is the power that enables us to empathize with humans whose experiences we have never shared.” After a story of fish and catches, Jesus shifts the image to Peter’s care of Jesus’ sheep and Jesus’ lambs. As Johannine scholar Raymond Brown notes, “The role of shepherd is to lead the sheep out to pasture, to know them personally so that they feel close to him, and especially to lay down his life for the sheep. At the Last Supper, Peter boasted that he would be willing to lay down his life for Jesus, but he failed miserably when challenged to do so. Evidently Jesus has not forgotten.” Yet by the time John’s 21st chapter is written, Peter has been martyred for the one whom he says he loves. Likewise the scales fall from Paul’s eyes and, after his baptism, he begins to proclaim Jesus in the synagogues and then to the Gentiles before he is beheaded by Rome for the effort. No doubt failure had given them an imagination for Jesus’ sheep and Jesus’ lambs who were perishing for want of his love.

This Sunday you and I begin our twenty-fourth year of being failures at following Jesus together. Yet when I say my thanksgivings to God for these years, I thank God for the multitude of ways God’s grace and forgiveness has led us to feed his lambs, tend his sheep, feed his sheep and so love him because we could imagine their lives as if they were our own. For the most part, we have not yet been given the grace to love him as those who lay down our lives for him. Nor have we laid down the life of this community of faith in order to follow him. Loving him in this way is not something we can decide or determine or design. We can only beseech him, who in the world’s eyes was a failure, to continue to use the fallible human beings that we are, until he comes again. Thanks be to God.