

"Dealing with Disappointment and Failure"

A sermon preached by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, February 4, 2007

Text: Lamentations 3:19-33 II Corinthians 4:1-12 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, open our minds and hearts by the power of your Holy Spirit, that we may receive your words of truth for us today. Amen.

A group of soldiers were being trained to parachute. The instructor told them how to operate their chutes. Then he said, "In the one in a million case that the main parachute doesn't open, remember you have a reserve parachute. Pull the hook on the right side of your vest. It will open gradually. When you hit the ground, bend your knees and relax. There will be a van there to take you back to the barracks."

One soldier was somewhat dubious. The instructor got him to the door of the airplane and pushed him out gently. The soldier pulled the cord. He looked up, but nothing was happening. The main parachute was not deploying. Then he yanked the reserve hooked and looked up. Still, nothing was happening. As he was plummeting down with lightning speed to the ground, he thought to himself, "Now I'll bet you that van won't even be there."

Some events in our lives can be disappointing. Sometimes we fail and disappoint ourselves. Sometimes other people disappoint us by their words or actions. In the midst of disappointment and failure, we can face the future with hope because of God's mercy and love.

Lester Jackson was my pastor while I was a student in middle school and high

school. He was one of the wisest pastors I have ever known. One time he told me, “It’s not what happens to you in life that is most important. It is how you deal with what happens to you.” His words have proven true to me.

When disappointment or failure or tragedy strikes, we have a decision to make. Will we turn away from God or will we turn toward him? Will we refuse his help or will we seek it? Will we depend on ourselves for the strength we need, or will we depend on him? Which road will we take? One road leads to doubt, anger, bitterness, fear, hopelessness and despair. The other leads to hope, comfort, peace, strength, and joy. Which will we take?

When difficulties come, it is natural to ask the question, “Why?” Why did this happen to me? If we dwell too long on the “Why?” question, we will spiral downward into self-pity. The more important question to ask is: “What? What do you want me to do, Lord? How should I react to this situation?”

The best time to prepare for life’s disappointments and setbacks is in advance, before they come crashing down upon us. Now is the time to build a spiritual foundation that will not collapse under the weight of difficulties. Now is the time to decide to turn to God and follow his way when troubles come.

All of us experience disappointments from time to time. Sometimes they are only minor, like a vacation that has to be canceled, or a sudden storm that ruins a picnic. Some disappointments are much harsher: a job that fails to satisfy, a child who becomes rebellious, a marriage that turns sour.

Repeated disappointment almost always triggers a series of other reactions: discouragement, anger, frustration, bitterness, resentment, even depression. Unless we learn to deal with disappointment, it will rob us of joy and poison our souls.

I remember a disappointment I experienced during my first semester as a student at Duke Divinity School. In college I had made very good grades. I had received an associate in arts degree, *magna cum laude*, and a bachelor’s degree, *cum laude*.

During my first semester at Duke, I took an early Church History class. The professor was excellent, and I was learning a great deal. The first assigned paper was to analyze a work written by the early Church Father, Origen. Origen was noted for his allegorical interpretation of scripture. I decided to be creative and highlight this type of interpretation. I titled my paper, "A Fundamentalist Looks at Origen," contrasting his interpretation with a more literal interpretation.

I received my paper back. I believe that the Ph.D. student who graded it thought that I was a fundamentalist. I looked at the grade – D +. That was disappointing! I realized that I could not graduate from seminary making that kind of grade. So I worked and worked on the next paper on Gregory of Nyssa. I decided not to be creative. I made a C. The next paper was on an essay by St. Augustine. I made a B +, and I was on my way.

Sooner or later we will all also experience failure. Like disappointment, failure can run the gamut from mild to almost overwhelming. It may trigger a host of reactions, including anxiety, stress and even despair.

In the year 586 B.C. the Babylonians attacked Israel. They destroyed Jerusalem, including the magnificent temple that King Solomon had constructed centuries earlier. They captured the Hebrew people and carried them off as slaves to Babylon. In the book of Lamentations, the author poignantly shares the overwhelming sense of loss the Hebrews experienced at the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, and their exile. Yet even in the midst of such disappointment and life-changing events, the author places his hope in God.

"The thought of my affliction and homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'" (Lamentations 3:19-24)

There are several strategies for dealing with times of disappointment and failure. One strategy is to keep our disappointments and failures in perspective. We all know people who get very upset or angry at even the smallest disappointment. Overreacting to minor problems is not right. Disappointments are part of life. We can't always have our own way, and we need to learn to separate what is significant from what is merely annoying. When I am upset by a situation, I try to ask myself, "What difference will this make a year from now?" That helps me judge how important it is. Of course, some disappointments and failures have profound implications for our future.

Another principle is to learn from our disappointments and failures. Ask yourself these questions: Could I have done anything to prevent this? Were my hopes or dreams unrealistic? Were my motives wrong? Is there a sin I need to confess or a new path God wants me to explore? What can I learn from this experience – even if it was unavoidable? What is God trying to teach me?

Another principle to remember is that in the midst of disappointments, God still loves you. Disappointment and failure are not signs that God has forsaken you or stopped loving you. Sometimes we see God's love most clearly when life is at its darkest.

During his missionary journeys, the apostle Paul experienced many disappointments and failures. He endured much persecution while he sought to tell people about Jesus Christ. He was mocked and ridiculed. He was imprisoned, put in the stocks and tortured. He was whipped. He was beaten up. He was run out of town.

He wrote the church in Corinth: "We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." (II Corinthians 4:8-9) Paul could endure such disappointment and pain and abuse because of God's mercy and grace at work in his life. He proclaimed, "Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart." (4:1)

That is the secret to overcoming disappointment and failure.

Prime Minister Winston Churchill heroically led Great Britain through many dark days during the struggles of World War II. After his final term in office, he was invited to give a speech to a group of students at the prep school he attended as a boy. Using a cane, he stood on the platform and made his way to the podium. He finally arrived there. This is what he said to those students: "Young men, always remember this. Never give up. Never give up. Never give up. Never, never, never, never." Then he sat down.

In the midst of disappointment and failure, we can face the future with hope because of God's mercy and love.

When we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we remember that there is a power available to us in the Holy Spirit that can help us overcome disappointment and failure. The Lord Jesus tells us, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Today as you come forward to receive the bread and the cup, receive the Spirit of Christ who empowers you not to lose heart in times of difficulties and to live for him. Amen.