

FAILURE AS SACRAMENT

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One of the things that I most value about the Christian faith tradition is its place for failure and people who fail – a welcoming place, a home. In its Scriptures, for example, almost every main character has a significant experience of failure or being regarded as one, including Jesus. The hopeful possibility that I want to consider here is that our experiences of failure may be *sacramental* – a profound means of grace in our lives.

Failure is something that many of us try to avoid at all costs. From the time we are little we learn the painful social consequences of failure. Who has not at least tasted the agony of being laughed at, shamed, mocked, or branded as a loser by the very people we hoped might accept and approve of us? Failure also confronts us with the unwelcome reality that we are not the person we liked to think we were. Jay Hanke captures it with the suggestion that failure is “a tear in the fabric of who I am”:

Failure is a dark experience that tells me, even as I struggle not to know or hear it, that at some basic level of my being I am inadequate. Somewhere in my life, I have not attained my own expectations for my behavior, my achievement, my personhood. At some level and to some degree, my failure is not just a “goof.” It is a tear in

*the fabric of who I am, a fissure in my sense of self, a shadow in my soul.*¹

Of course, sometimes a feeling of failure is really just the result of coming up against another person’s unreasonable expectations – like a mother who feels a failure because her children fight and don’t clean up after themselves – somewhere she picked up a message that a perfect mother wouldn’t have children who did those kind of things! If we are perfectionists, it may be our own unreasonable expectations of ourselves that lead us to struggle with feelings of failure. We set the bar impossibly high for ourselves.

Yet there are times when even by a reasonable standard we *have* failed, perhaps spectacularly. A moment of irresponsibility, stupidity, desperation or betrayal that leads to failure and regret. And at other times failure comes out of left field, when we were really doing our best to succeed. Perhaps a business failure, a family breakup, a job loss, a character assassination that wasn’t deserved. Either way the end result is often a deep sense of shame and humiliation.

Failure may rupture not only our sense of self, or our relationships with others, but also the fabric of our relationship with God. God, how could you have let this happen to me? Why didn’t you warn me? Why didn’t you protect me? I was doing my best

¹ Jay M. Hanke, “Failure: Where the Fabric is Torn”, *Weavings*, 7 (1992), 25.

to live for you and you let me fail, you let me be humiliated. I felt so utterly alone – where were you? Think of the crucified Jesus – humiliated, stripped of all dignity, stripped of reputation, his followers disappointed, his opponents mocking and taunting. *He saved others, he cannot save himself!* Three amazing years of ministry all apparently for nothing. *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

On a recent retreat I confronted some of my own painful memories of having failed – by my own standards if no one else’s. They were literally painful memories, like a knife in the guts. In my room at the retreat centre where I was staying, there was a crucifix on the wall. A familiar representation of the suffering Jesus nailed to a cross. As I looked up at the crucifix on this occasion, I found myself saying: “You know don’t you? You really do know what it’s like.” I saw the wound in his side where a spear had been thrust in to make sure he was dead and felt a connection with the stabbing pain of memories I was re-experiencing. So I found I was not alone in my wrestling with a sense of failure and humiliation. For me, failure as sacrament first meant that in Jesus I had a companion who knew exactly how I was feeling. There was also a sense of invitation: “You know you don’t have to carry this alone. Let me carry the weight with you. Find rest in me.”

As the retreat progressed, another picture captivated me – Rembrandt’s

painting “Descent from the Cross”. It is an unappealing picture of Jesus – a naked, lifeless corpse – humiliated, flopping about in an awkward, almost grotesque manner, completely helpless. It reminded me of Aslan in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*. The noble King of the Beasts is bound, shorn, taunted and killed. His body is left lying on the stone table, humiliated and abandoned. Our lowest moments may also leave us feeling utterly exposed, naked, humiliated and alone in the world. It is easy to feel like an alien among those whose lives seem so normal, untroubled by the shame of failure that is tearing at the fabric of our lives.

As I continued to look at Rembrandt’s painting my focus widened from Jesus’ humiliated, lifeless body to those who were lovingly letting him down from the cross. I was moved by the care and effort with which they were handling his body. Others look on – Joseph of Arimathea, who had negotiated with Pilate to obtain Jesus’ body and provided the tomb where it would be buried, and the women who stayed with Jesus throughout his ordeal. In *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, we find that Aslan also is not utterly alone in the hour of his humiliation. Lucy and Susan hold vigil, and in time the little mice who love their Lion King creep out to nibble through the ropes binding him so tightly.

The phrase that came to me in relation

to the painting was "Humiliation held gently." Such love surrounds Jesus in this picture, despite his pitiful and humiliating state. I thought about the quality of love that he had shown to unlovely, untouchable people in his lifetime – lepers, people with appalling diseases and deformities, poor people, all kinds of people who in their own societies were failures and worse than failures. The quality of love that Jesus showed these people is shown now to him in his time of rejection, humiliation and apparent failure.

Humiliation held gently. A body let down gently. In his dying moments Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" "Where are you when I need you ... Why have you let me down?" We could see this picture as one of God's absence, *God's* failure to be there when needed. Yet *God is* there – in the love and care of those who attend to Jesus in his death. Within the circle of friends that attend to Jesus Rembrandt captured a special quality of light, standing out from the background darkness of the work. Is God absent in Jesus' darkest moment of utter humiliation? Has God *let him down*? No. God is present, both in the suffering of Jesus on the cross and in this loving *letting down* of Jesus from the cross. Humiliation held gently, lovingly. Failure as sacrament.

Sometimes I wonder too whether God has let us down, when I watch people's lives utterly devastated and reduced to a pitiful level of existence

- through a tsunami, a hurricane, an earthquake, war or terrorism. God, why have you forsaken these people? But at such times a myriad of little loving actions can also be seen, if I look for them. Ordinary people emerge to give, go, help, pray, and weep with those who are weeping – humiliation is held gently. The God who apparently abandons and lets people down reappears in the love of those who gently reach out to help.

I wonder who will be there for me when I find myself in a place of pitiable failure and humiliation? I think of the people who have been there at such times. I have a renewed sense of the importance of not judging others, not gossiping their misfortunes, not shrinking back in embarrassment when people make a mess of things - but rather stepping forward to be a friend, helping to hold their humiliation with care and gentleness. "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (Matt 25:40)

Failure as sacrament. The reality of my own failures brings me to the cross. I rediscover the companionship of Jesus. I glimpse the presence of God just when I thought God was absent. And eventually I am led beyond self-pity to a deeper humility, compassion and practical love for others in their time of need.

