

Failure And Insignificance In The Kingdom(s) – Judy Cox

1 Samuel 15:34-16:13; Psalm 20; 2 Corinthians 5:6-17; Mark 4:26-34

My first (but certainly not last!) experience of deer-in-the-headlights paralysis ended in excruciatingly public failure. Picture me afterwards, stumbling off the stage, bewildered and humiliated, hunting, past rows of inattentive faces, for my seat in the vast throng. I knew myself insignificant and only too deserving of the dismissive glances that did fall on me...and the reproach of those whom I had represented so poorly...

It was only an elementary school spelling bee! (The word that felled me was “truly”—“truly” combined with stage fright!) In the 49 years since I’ve experienced much more of both failure and insignificance. I suspect you, too, share similar memories—those you hold, but can laugh about, like this one, and others not so funny. Those, too hurtful to share openly, still clutch at us; their power over us continues. We know that our world doesn’t accept failure. We must succeed, be Number One!—as in not marginalized, NOT insignificant!

Failure and insignificance—both play a role today in this Old Testament reading about the beginnings of the kingdom of Israel. Unexpectedly, in Jesus’ parables from Mark chapter 4—parables about the Kingdom of God!!!—failure and insignificance show up too. To find them today, in both passages, we have to do some reading “between the lines,” as the lectionary has omitted some of those verses (or reserved them for elsewhere in the Christian calendar). Or perhaps we should say that we have to find them “on the margins”...that’s where we find the failed and insignificant, after all.

Samuel is struggling. God had appointed him to anoint Saul as Israel’s first (human) king in the verses following last week’s reading. Yet, as intervening chapters show, Saul’s kingship has failed through his rebellion. Certainly that might call Samuel’s own discernment and prophetic vocation into question. Is it Samuel who has failed in his listening to God? But our text seems to show Samuel honestly rather than self-centeredly mourning: *Samuel grieved over Saul*. He’s so stuck in his grief that God comforts him: *How long will you grieve over Saul?*

Let’s not miss the much more radical failure here: God’s good intentions for Saul were balked by Saul’s own actions—yes, God’s intentions failed. Was it as hard, and maybe as frightening, for Samuel as it is for us, to understand Yahweh as the God Who takes real risks with humanity, Who invites us into partnership and gives space for decisive human response? But human failure does not result in God’s refusing to engage any further, or to act further! God responds creatively! Nor, here, does it imply that Samuel wasn’t hearing God properly when first anointing Saul. The divine gift of freedom to humans, risky and painful as it is to God, modifies but does not frustrate God’s good purposing: *Fill your horn with oil and set out; I will send you to Jesse the Bethlehemite, for I have provided for myself a king among his sons*.

Once in Bethlehem, Samuel assumes he knows how God works and what God’s up to. Saul was tall and striking—obviously his replacement must be too! One impressive brother after another fails to meet God’s mysterious standard. Finally, the most insignificant, the youngest (and likely shortest), called in from the fields belatedly, proves to be God’s choice. How can God’s promised ruler grow from this “nothing,” this ignorable and ordinary boy? But he will...

Samuel has to be reminded of the difference between human seeing and God’s seeing; *the LORD does not see as mortals see... the LORD looks on the heart*. Dr. Karla Suomala, Professor of Religion at

Luther College, comments on this emphasis, this “clustering of words that have ‘seeing’ as part of their grammatical core (no less than eight times in this pericope).” She continues, “Beginning in 1 Samuel 16:1, ... the Hebrew literally reads, “I have seen among his sons a king for myself” ... Over and over again, the text, using wordplay, contrasts human-seeing with God-seeing. ... The passage comes to a conclusion in 16:12, after [seven] sons are brought before Samuel, and all are found wanting. Finally, David is called in from the field, and we learn that he is, literally, ‘good for seeing.’ ... God then tells Samuel, ‘Arise and anoint him; for this is the one.’ ... Although we are never told what, precisely, God sees in David, the narrator, somewhat ironically, describes what would have been visible to humans—that David was ruddy and had *beautiful eyes*.”

Is the implication that David can see as God sees??? That would be like Jesus, right?—seeing with God’s eyes. Surely, in the Kingdom of God (as opposed to Israel) all will be different! God’s Kingdom doesn’t include failure and insignificance, does it? Let’s take a look through Jesus’ eyes...

Trying to share with us that divine perspective, Jesus uses parables, images “thrown alongside” (from *para*, alongside of, and *bole*, from *ballein*, to throw). These image-stories help us catch a glimpse of God’s Kingdom from God’s perspective.

The lectionary skips us over several of Jesus’ teaching parables about the Kingdom of God in chapter 4, taking us directly to verse 26. A common thread, the seed (familiar to their agricultural society), runs through most of these parables. This symbol also evokes the repeated prophetic word that God will gloriously restore Israel, will “plant” her again in her own land after the Exile, restoring the fruitfulness, as it were, of the reclaimed family farm.

In the first and probably most famous of these seed parables, that of the Sower (or Soils), Jesus presents the coming kingdom of God as the risky enterprise of farming, but nonsensical farming: scattering the seed any old place, with mixed results that include multiple failure! Most of the seed goes to waste because the soil isn’t fit for it, can’t sustain it. Some does provide a rich harvest, but nowhere near all! NOT what Israel expected God’s restoration to look like: partial failure?!? Only partial success? This is not large, and unmistakable, and glorious!

In last week’s gospel text some of Jesus’ hearers got on board, while others, surprisingly, aligned against him. Elise reminded us that even his family, the ultimate in supposed “insiders,” went *to restrain him* and found themselves “outsiders.” In this Soils parable we find other reactions: some hear and forget. Some join in with enthusiasm, but only temporarily; some have too much else in their lives distracting them from attending. Only some bear fruit. Radically, Jesus proclaims that the coming restoration of God’s kingdom won’t automatically include all Israel. Supposed insiders may find themselves outsiders! God’s kingdom does come, but not in the way they’ve expected...not in the way it could have, had they seen and responded to God in Jesus. It’s not sheer, unmitigated success; it includes failure.

Today’s seed parables expand this motif and nuance it. A farmer sows seed and life goes on, day in and day out. The seed grows on its own without the sower knowing how it does so. It’s a mystery! The seed sprouts and grows; the earth produces of itself. Just so God’s kingdom, not gloriously, but slowly, comes to fruition. The role humans play is to sow and then rest, in trust. A mastery of botany isn’t necessary to the ensuing harvest, only patient trust. As French philosopher Teilhard de Chardin famously advises, “Above all, trust in the slow work of God.”

It ends with another Old Testament metaphor: the sickle will be used to reap the harvest, as on the Day

of the Lord. This comes from the book of Joel especially—the Day when God’s reign will be established and the nations judged.

Jesus’ ministry doesn’t look like the movement of God that Israel is expecting, but it is, in fact, the seedtime for God’s long-awaited harvest. The disciples and other listeners—and readers of this gospel—can’t comprehend how God’s promised planting can begin and grow so imperceptibly and “ordinarily.” But it will, and harvest WILL come. When nothing seems to us to be happening—we’re wrong. God IS up to something. Neither the disciples’ cluelessness nor our own will block the fruitfulness of God’s Kingdom. And there WILL be a decisive harvest time, an expected Day of the Lord.

But don’t jump to rejoice about that just yet, Israel! As with the first seed parable, the reality will not match expectations. Harvest does not mean Israel’s triumph.

Israel expects in God’s restoration to become the majestic, noble cedar tree of Ezekiel (in an alternative Old Testament text for today, in fact!). Instead of that majestic tree, Jesus references an insignificant weed you can’t get rid of. Smallest of all the seeds familiar to his audience, a mustard seed correlates with the smallness of Christian beginnings. The audience looking at Jesus in Galilee, surrounded by a local crowd, mustn’t protest, “This can’t possibly be the beginning of God’s great and glorious kingdom!” Nor should the early church, a persecuted minority, compare its circumstances with Biblical prophecy, and in bewilderment lose faith.

Mustard has another characteristic. It invades and takes over like kudzu has taken over our South. No one would properly and deliberately SOW a plant so disruptive and persistent (the very definition of a weed, right?!) Well, apparently God’s sowing is exactly this “improper,” disruptive and persistent! Jesus implies that to human seeing God’s Kingdom might appear as an insignificant and irritating weed, something we might wrong-headedly work to eradicate, rather than, celebrating, join.

This pesky Kingdom weed persists, and grows. Inexorable, like the seed growing in secret, it also disrupts. It takes over! It becomes, not a majestic tree but a *great...shrub*. There’s a letdown for you!

Then what? The birds of the air (code for the Gentiles!) come and nest in it. Not much glory for Israel in this overgrown shrub metaphor—way too much inclusion of “those outsiders,” from the perspective of the “insiders”! The “judgment of the nations” from Israel’s “Day of the Lord” and “harvest” expectation turns out instead to be inclusion and embrace of the other! Israel will be alongside the nations, welcoming and providing for them, not rejoicing “over” them—offensive indeed to some of Jesus’ audience, but so encouraging to the Church! God’s Kingdom will, as God always intended (inevitably, if eventually), offer shade and home to the whole world.

The disciples and the early church struggle along with Samuel. How can God’s promised kingdom, whether the ancient kingdom of Israel, or the reign of God that Jesus initiates, include failure? How can it, in either Testament, possibly grow from this insignificant “nothing,” this almost imperceptible and ordinary beginning? We’re right there with them in these struggles! We see with human seeing, not with God’s seeing. We all need Jesus’ exhortation: don’t be discouraged by the imperceptible and the ordinary; even when nothing seems to be happening, God IS up to something. From small beginnings come great and unexpected outcomes. Failure does not equate with defeat. Hang in there! As the Apostle Paul reminds us in today’s Epistle: *we walk by faith, not by sight*.

Sometimes we're alongside other hearers. We might be wrongly assuming we're "insiders," too. We may need to confess that we have actually resisted, rather than celebrating, the unmanageable, disruptive, persistent and living work that is God's...God Who is up to something, whether we see it or not...whether we acknowledge it or not, whether we understand it or not.

Most of all, we need the parable that Jesus lived! In his very self he is a parable for us, *cast alongside* us, demonstrating God's mighty *power made perfect in weakness*, in insignificance, and in failure.

What is the Incarnation, if not the ultimate in divine risking—accepting and embracing powerless insignificance? Where does Jesus come, if not to the margins—to a negligible people group, and specifically, to the outcast and marginalized within even that group? What does Jesus the Messiah experience in Israel's rejection, if not failure? Indeed, what is the Crucifixion, if not messianic failure rather than success?

Yes, since creation and continuingly, God has taken real risks with humanity, inviting us into partnership and giving space for decisive human response. But failure does not result in God's writing us off, refusing to engage further, or to act! God's creativity did not end on the sixth day of Creation—God always responds creatively—thus, the Resurrection!

So we come to the Table that our Lord Jesus spreads for us, freshly thankful for his presence with and sustenance for us. We are invited to partake of, take into ourselves, these signs of insignificance—Body—and failure—Blood. We are invited to embrace his failure, his insignificance, in his death, and ours, that we may be embraced and restored in his resurrection life! And we say, "Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ!"