

Learning to Live with Limitations – Brian Hartley

2 Samuel 5:1-5, 9-10; Ps. 48; 2 Corinthians 12:2-10; Mark 6:-13

If you haven't noticed, it has been a bit hot and dry, of late. In fact, just last Thursday, the Illinois Farm Bureau reported what many of us had already surmised: many crops in southern Illinois could be lost due to a drought expected to last through late September. The bureau spokesman, John Hawkins, said that corn and soybeans have been hit particularly hard. "I've actually seen some farmer photos in deep southern Illinois where I could call certain fields just basically a total loss. Murphy's Law is pretty much in place for much of the corn and soybean crop. If anything can go wrong, it will go wrong this summer. There's not much you can do about it, most farmers just have to grin and bear it," he concluded (<http://will.illinois.edu/news/spotstory/drought-hits-southern-illinois-crops-hard/>). These are not the kind of words we like to hear at the beginning of the summer. For some farmers, it could mean not only the loss of one's year crop but of their livelihood. The intensity of the heat and the lack of adequate rainfall may leave us feeling hot and out-of-sorts, but when you count on a crop for your living, such disastrous environmental news can be personally and professionally devastating.

These days we are all well aware of how connected we all are and of how strained the resources of our planet have become. From raging forest fires out west to torrential rains in Florida, the heating up of the earth's atmosphere appears to many of us all too apparent these days. That sense of environmental limitations has now become yoked to the economic realities of the past few years which should remind us just how limited governments and institutions are when it comes to quick fixes in a rather complex global financial system. And for some of us, as we grow ever older and our bodies refuse to do that which they did just a decade or two ago, this overarching nemesis of lowered expectations has become all too personal—as our mortality rears its ugly head every time the doctor probes and prods in the dreaded annual physical. Everywhere we turn in this season of growing desolation, it seems, we are being reminded of life's difficulties and challenges and we long for a Messiah to come and turn back the clock and restore us and our world to a time of unlimited possibilities and vast resources.

But today's lessons reveal a quite different story—one that goes to the heart of our very presuppositions. For this morning's gospel lesson describes Jesus as something of a failure and Paul having to make do with a ministry hounded by a "thorn in the flesh." And, even our Old Testament lesson, which is filled with words of praise regarding the reign of King David, comes to us a full seven-and-one-half years after last's week's lesson concerning the death of Saul and Jonathan. For, the reality was that it took even the man after God's own heart the equivalent of two Presidential terms simply to clear the ground and unite the tribes so that they were ready to move forward as a people—the better part of eight years of constant warfare just

so that they could get started. On this hot Sunday morning, the message of hope that confronts us is not about how you, too, can work signs and wonders and become master of your own unlimited possibilities but about how God is at work in and through the hard times, the times of lowered expectations, reduced resources, and just flat-out pain, suffering, and failure, to bring about his Kingdom purposes.

If you will recall last week's gospel lesson, you will remember that it ended on a note of amazement. After all, Jesus had healed a woman suffering from bloody hemorrhages, just by letting her touch his cloak, and then he had rounded off the day by raising Jairus' daughter from the dead. Why, if such miracles took place during our campaign season, everyone would be promoting "Jesus-of-Nazareth" care. No one would be calling its constitutionality into question or threatening to repeal it! Folks would be lined up to be touched by the Master.

But Mark tells us that when Jesus came marching back into his hometown, he encountered three responses: first they were astonished, then they were offended, and, finally, they simply chose not to believe. By the time we get about halfway into the text, the evangelist has taken their astonishment and placed it at Jesus' feet; now it is he who is shaking his head. My guess is that this may be a side of Jesus that many of us have never considered before. After all, how often are we privileged with a story in which the hero, the Messiah, the Son of God himself, finds himself faced with imminent failure? As Bruce Epperly writes in a recent reflection, "despite his healing powers, Jesus is limited by concrete expressions of unbelief."

I want to pause here for just a moment to make sure that we don't run roughshod over this important insight. All too often, we tend to think of Jesus in only victorious categories—as a winner. Perhaps it is the nature of a culture, as Zach suggested just last week, which is obsessed with being number one and glorying in success. After all, in just a few short weeks many of us will be glued to our electronic devices taking in the events that surround the summer Olympics in London. And we know that at the end of each event there is only one national anthem played. Three may take home medals, but only one gets to see her or his national flag raised the highest. And there it is for all the world to see—I kicked his butt and we are superior to you. Na-na-na-na-na-na!

But the good news of the Gospel is that failure is more often the case than is success. No one knew this more poignantly than did the apostle Paul. Faced with those who were more eloquent than he, more sophisticated than he—faced with opponents in the world class city of Corinth who could appeal to signs and wonders, even visions as demonstrations of their power, in what does the apostle to the Gentiles choose to boast? He speaks of weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities. These, he says, are the everyday reality—the most common context into which we are called upon to do ministry and to live for Christ. Oh, yes, he says, he, too, can appeal to experience. But this isn't where we should look first to find Jesus and his Kingdom. No, as he has said innumerable times to this troubled congregation in Corinth, we must look first to the cross.

But, note that neither Jesus nor Paul is about to abandon hope on this note of finality and failure. Instead, what is so amazing is that they go on—they persist. Jesus does what he can for a handful of folk and then returns to the task of teaching and preparing the rag-tag group of men gathered around him. The story doesn't end with his rejection in Nazareth. It continues on because he continues on. And, likewise, Paul doesn't give in to self-pity and grouching about his mysterious thorn in the flesh, but, instead, these very challenges serve for him as a reference point, a point from which to both launch and understand his divine calling.

Most of you know that I stepped into a new role this past week. In fact, I think half of St. Paul's found themselves wearing a different hat this week than last! I am excited at my age to get a chance to learn something new. But, I would be less than honest if I told you that I'm not scared to death and all too cognizant of how often I will probably fail—myself, my colleagues, and my superiors. I look around me and see all of these brilliant and talented people and feel a little bit like Paul when others compared him to vastly more flashy prototypes. How can I possibly live up to the inevitable expectations? And, I sense that I am not alone in these feelings.

A few weeks ago, I found myself helping my parents move into a little duplex so that they could be closer to family. As is my custom, I donned my running gear and headed out early in the morning before the heat could settle into the all-too-familiar streets of a little town in the northwest corner of Arkansas. After running for about a mile, the cemetery came into view where my grandparents and uncles are buried and where my parents have already raised up a gravestone that has their names etched deeply into it. Every family member buried there, so far, has lived a hard life—not one of them ever daring to venture inside the quadrangle of a college or university. As I stood in front of my grandparents' grave site and thought about their hardscrabble lives of chopping cotton and trying to raise a family of boys on a farm through the Depression, I remembered, again, my inheritance as the descendant of the poor working-class of America's South—many of whom have known more failure than success, more sorrow than joy, more pain and suffering than triumph.

So, I have to ask myself, what does it suggest when I worry about whether I am equal to the task of a white-collar worker when my grandfather, diagnosed with severe heart problems, didn't think twice about hitching his mule to the plow, throwing a collar around his neck, and going out to labor in the hot sun for fourteen hours a day walking up to 30 miles on hard barren soil? Perhaps it is the case that we who are privileged to have been educated and live lives of greater leisure fear more, we give in more easily, because, for most of us, we haven't had to live our lives in the everyday shadow of imminent failure. Maybe many of us have chosen to revel in stories of success, even embraced the wrong Jesus, because we haven't really paid close attention to the harsh realities of the gospel narrative. Maybe, as Zach suggested to us last week, we have allowed the sounds of the cultural anthem, the strains of consumerist pop tunes, to so permeate our lives that when we fall down and scrape our knees a bit, we worry that the sky is falling instead of that perhaps the best place to understand what is our true calling is down there in the dirt on our knees.

The issue before us today is not whether or not we will get hurt, or fall down, or even fail. The answer to all of these is a decided “yes.” The question before us is: will we persist even when we are failing, will we learn to embrace our calling, and will we begin to understand that limited resources are not a punishment but an opportunity through which God brings about his Kingdom purposes? In one of his little books, Henri Nouwen suggests that, “at such moments, God asks us to jump from our secure perches, to stop calculating the risks. Jesus bids us, ‘Take up your cross, follow me...Don’t insist on knowing exactly what comes next but trust that you are in the hand of God, who will guide your life.’” He goes on to say, “A person in difficulty can trust because of a belief that something else is possible. To trust is to allow for hope,” (Turn My Mourning into Dancing: Finding Hope in Hard Times, 39, 53).

I don’t know what particular issues you are grappling with today. Some of us face difficult choices in the days ahead—about work, about our children, our parents, about whether to keep at it or to throw in the towel. The good news this morning is not that success awaits us, but that God is there with us—there in the dust and grime, the filth and squalor of our lives. Whether we have to plow the beans under or, as some folks have done recently out in Colorado, sift through the ashes of our lives and get back up. All of life is made up of constant and continual limitation. It is simply untrue that, in a world of limited resources, “the sky is the limit.” But, in the midst of those limitations there is always hope rooted in abundant grace. It is a grace to which Paul could appeal when he said, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” And, ultimately, it is to that grace, to that Christ, and to that cross on which he died, that we can turn and find hope. And, it is in light of that great hope that we today can proclaim with the apostle, “My God will supply all my needs through God’s riches.”