Columns
Spirituality



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As a culture, we don't like failure. We want to be winners, not losers. American Christianity influences the larger culture's dislike of failure. Many strains of Christianity echo with the prosperity gospel, asserting that if we don't have wealth, abundance, and success, then we must lack the favor of the divine. If we can't feel God in a specific way, we must be doing something wrong. It must be we who have sinned, strayed, failed.

The Catholic tradition has a broader understanding of success and failure. The mystics understand that our spiritual life has ups and downs, like the seasons, and it is usually not our fault if we are in a season of desolation or disconnection. The disciples of Jesus are extravagant failures, but nonetheless beloved. Many spiritual teachers remind us gently that the world's notion of success is faulty. We are more than what people tell us we are based on our accomplishments or acquisitions.

In the Gospel of Luke, just before Jesus first calls Peter, then known as Simon, to discipleship, Simon, James and John had been fishing all night and had not caught a thing. Their work was a complete failure. They hauled up their nets, ready to go home empty handed.

Like many of us, I know what it feels like to fail, to work my hardest and get nothing. To try my best, use my skills and knowledge and tools and come up empty handed. I find it moving to think the disciples experienced this as well. My guess is they were good at fishing; they had experience and abilities, boats and nets, but they failed. And they pulled up their nets. I imagine they felt tired, exhausted, hungry, with nothing to show for their efforts. Then Jesus shows up and asks them to take him out onto the water so he can continue preaching to the large crowd gathered by the shore. Jesus, apparently, is unmoved by their lack of success with the day's catch. He sees something in them which has nothing to do with how many fish they landed.

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They get back in the boat and take Jesus out from the shore to continue his work. The Gospel story doesn't say how long Simon and his friends waited on the boat while Jesus preached, but after Jesus is done, he tells Simon to put his nets back in the water. Simon protests, saying they've been fishing all night long and got nothing. Not one fish. But, Simon says, "If you say so, I'll give it a try."

We know what happened next. An abundance of fish. So many fish that Simon calls over the other boat, and both boats get so full they are almost sinking. Simon understands something about Jesus in this, and he's afraid and protests that he, Simon, is a sinful man. Jesus tells him not to be afraid. And then Simon, John and James leave the great haul behind and follow Jesus.

They fail. They are then asked to do something they probably don't want to do, but they comply, out of respect, hospitality or some impulse of generosity. Their empty nets are filled to the breaking point. But that's not the end of the story. They don't then take their fish and their profits and run home, and say, "Thanks, Lord, for the bounty, we're out of here." What if their interaction with Jesus causes them to consider new and different definitions of success?

We need a new spirituality of failure. My friend the Rev. Meghan Mullarkey, vicar of St. Columba's Episcopal Church, pointed out in her sermon on this passage that the fish did not go to waste. When the disciples walked away to start discipling, they understood that they were sharing this epic haul with their community. The fish didn't rot; it was gathered into cooking pots for miles around. Failure — mediated by grace, honoring hospitality and generosity — may result in abundance. Or it may result in a change of heart, a change of direction. But our responsibility to the community is the same. Share. Share the food, share the understanding, share the realization that what society says is failure may be an opportunity for transformation.

Failure is painful. The loss of a career, a business reversal, the end of a relationship can carve off great slices of who we think we are, damage our self-worth, our very identity. When we fail and come up empty, we should honor our suffering. We should sit in the damp nets and honor the sorrow of not getting what we worked so hard for. But we should not close ourselves off to hope and grace. We should stay open and listen for that voice that invites us to remember that success and failure as the world sees it does not define us. There may be another ending to our story.