

Love and Forgiveness Triumph Over Defeat

April 16, 2023

The game was over. The roaring stadium was now silent, empty of fans, a forlorn place of crushed popcorn boxes and drink-cups, trampled programs, spent confetti. The coach entered a sullen, utterly quiet locker room. Helmets are on the floor, jerseys pulled off and piled in a wash-bin.

“I just want you guys to know that I am really proud of the way you played this afternoon,” he said. “Really proud. We didn’t win, but we did prove to a lot of people what we could do. It was a moral victory.”

On the way out that evening, with autumn sky now dark, the second string tackle turned to the quarterback and asked, “What’s a moral victory?”

The quarterback said, “It’s what a coach tells you when you lose the game. It’s what a coach says to a team when he knows it’s his last season.”

If you can’t fool a 17-year-old football player about failure, who can you fool? When the scores are read on the 6:30 sportscast, nobody ever talks about “moral victory.” They put the numbers on the board. Those with the highest numbers are winners. Those with the lowest are losers. Unless it is the sport of golf – then it is the opposite way around.

Failure and defeat – how do you deal with it? Well, one response can be cheap rationalization – “It was a moral victory.”

Another response is to blame failure on some other person or some outside influence – a method as old as humanity. In the story of the garden, Adam states, “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” Eve, in turn, said, “The serpent tricked me, and I ate.” Blaming.

Those who focus on blame when things go wrong sometimes believe that we all have responsibility and things go wrong because someone is lazy or incompetent. They thus make judgments about the internal characteristics and motivations of others. Their values typically say ‘The wicked should be punished’ and finger-pointing and blame is a part of this punishment. They take the moral high ground, sitting as prosecutor, judge and jury, and pronounce guilt and sentence. Others who enter the blame game may be driven by a sense of guilt or fear and blame others in order to distract or deflect attention from themselves.

I guess the easiest thing to do when something goes wrong is to blame others for it. Doesn’t matter who is right or wrong, we just like to blame others. We blame others for being poor. We blame the government for the high gas prices. We blame our employers for not earning enough salary every month. We blame others when our kid is sick. We blame others for everything we find negative in our lives. Why? Because it is easier to blame others than to work at finding the truth. So, one way to deal with defeat is to rationalize it. Another is to play the blame game.

Yet another method we use in dealing with defeat is to ignore the facts and basically hide our heads in the sand and make claims that are half-truths at best, if not outright lies. We see this at its best

(or should I say “worst”) in our current partisan political environment. The defeated side always makes claims other than, “we lost and our platform was rejected.” Instead, they will always claim that their platform is what the people want and that the other side somehow, in an evil way, hoodwinked the voters.

Well, no matter on which side of the political divide you fall, the fact is that, as in every election, one side wins and one side loses – one side’s platform is accepted and the other side’s is defeated. And, in a democracy like ours, voters expect that it is the values and goals of the majority that will prevail until such time as another election changes that fact. There is no way that it can be truthfully claimed that such is not the case and when anyone tries to claim anything different, they are being dishonest. One exception that I call a quirk in our system is that the electoral college vote sometimes means that the candidate receiving the larger popular vote does not win.

I’m sure that there are many other ways to deal with defeat and failure but these three are the most common – to rationalize, to blame, and to ignore the facts, maybe even lie about them.

Now – think back to that first Good Friday. Can you think of anything that symbolizes failure more than seeing the One you worship and idolize hanging, like a common criminal, on the cross? He was dragged through the midst of a hostile people. They killed him and by mid-afternoon it was over. Death reigned. A losing season again for God. Death was laughing. No moral victory there. No more blaming the power structures. No reform of the powers of the greedy and the opposition. If ever there was monumental failure, this was it!

Our scriptures for this day are efforts to deal with that failure and defeat. In the Gospel reading, we find the close friends and followers of Christ gathered in fear behind locked doors. They are languishing in defeat and fear, not sure of where to go or what to do next. Into that scene comes the risen Christ and, all of a sudden, failure is overcome. Death has been defeated. Now mind you, Thomas is not there and doubts what he is being told but, one week later, he also experiences the risen Christ. And then, our first lesson gives us the practical results of how huge that victory is.

The first lesson reading is a picture of a confrontation between the apostles and the Jewish council. It is really an in-house confrontation – the Jews who sit on the council and the Jews who are followers of the way of Jesus are debating with each other. It is a significant disagreement, to be sure, but no one taking part in this discussion considers himself (and it would have been an all-male gathering) anything other than a faithful Jew. There is no conflict here between Christians and Jews. All are faithful Jews. This is important to recognize in our age of increasing polarities and the rising anti-Jewish immorality.

The real topic of this story is found in the words of the high priest: “you are determined to bring this man’s blood on us.” The real issue is his perception that these Jesus followers are blaming the death of Jesus on them – the religious authorities and, under Jewish law, they fear that Jesus’ followers may try to exact reparations from them. From the perspective of the council, the execution of Jesus was the execution of a political dissident who threatened the status quo and the rather fine line that the religious authorities were trying to walk with the occupiers – the Roman Empire. However – from the perspective of the followers of Jesus, his crucifixion was a betrayal, not of a political instigator, but of the Messiah for whom all of them had waited and prayed. And, we should note, this is not a small difference of perspective.

The council has forbidden the apostles to preach or teach in Jesus' name because they fear reprisals, riots, and a destabilized Israel. They fear, probably accurately, that there is enough support for the teachings of Jesus among the common people and enough anger at his death that the whole system might collapse at any moment. And when the Roman Empire feels threatened, repression is swift and cataclysmic . . . and the innocent will pay along with the guilty, children along with adults. And mostly they will pay with their lives. The council certainly does not want this.

This story is important not because Peter tells the council what they really want to hear him say: that they are innocent in the death of Jesus. In fact, Peter continues to tell them that they are responsible. This story is important and challenging, however, because Peter tells them that the death of Jesus proves for all time that God's mercy and forgiveness is universal. Yes, the council has a responsibility for nailing Jesus to the cross. It was their choice and they choose death rather than life. But, as we find in our reading, "God exalted him . . . that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins." Hear it again: "that he might give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins."

Here is our challenge in our families, in our circle of friends, in our workplaces, in our places of volunteer activity, in our town halls, in our courts, in our legislatures, in our war zones, in our political arenas, and yes, in our churches: to be witnesses to the forgiveness of sin – our own sins as well as the sins of others. Peter says, "we ('we' meaning all disciples of Jesus) are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit." The things of which Peter is speaking are repentance and forgiveness.

This is not an option if we are to believe those who lived and studied with Jesus in his lifetime. Our own repentance for our own sins and our radical forgiveness for the sins of others is not an option; it is a mandate. When Jesus hung on the cross, he asked for the forgiveness of those who had nailed him there because "they did not know what they did." He asked us to hang the whole idea of guilt on the cross with him and leave it there. No more vengeance. None!

And standing before the council – that group of people who have beaten them and imprisoned them and tried to silence them – Peter says on behalf of the apostles: "we will not stop preaching and teaching because our obedience to God comes before anything else." And then he assures them that they will not also seek restitution for the death of their rabbi. That is over. Done. Finished. Dead.

Jesus gave us one commandment – to love as he loved. Jesus loved even his enemies. He prayed for them. He forgave them. In our own time and place, we are called to one witness: to love as Jesus loved . . . even our enemies. It doesn't matter what anyone else does. Jesus didn't command us, you will note, to love only those who are willing to love us back. He doesn't seem to care whether his enemies love him (and, judging by their actions, they certainly didn't). Jesus' life and death were about breaking the cycle of hatred and entrenchment behind walls of hostility. His life and death were about wiping the practice of guilt from the face of the earth. And our lives, as the body of Christ, are about witnessing to that practice. It means witnessing in the midst of failure.

Last Sunday, Christians everywhere focused in on the empty tomb. Today we focus on the task given to us by the risen Christ – the responsibility to witness purposefully to a new relationship

with God through the gift of forgiveness and love imparted to us by God's Holy Spirit. Let us never minimize this task. As followers of Jesus in today's world, we were not sent like John the Baptist to call everyone to repentance so that we can announce their forgiveness. We are not the angry prophets proclaiming damnation to all who fail to repent. We are not the agents of gloom and doom predicting the wrath to come. Nor are we judges who declare guilt or innocence to the crowds. We are commissioned to speak of a forgiving God who loves us no matter what, even in defeat. There is not one single thing we can do that will cause God to love us more. Likewise, there is not one single thing we can do that will cause God to love us less. It is God's nature to be merciful, gracious, and forgiving, and we have been entrusted with declaring that message to a waiting world and to make sure that we live that message in our own lives. Amen.

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Acts 2:14a, 22-24, 32; John 20:19-31
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