

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Faith Des Peres Presbyterian Church
September 29, 2013
Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

Your Word, O Lord, is our inspiration, our light, and our motion. Your Word, O Lord, is power, is wisdom, and is comfort. Guide us today, as we listen to the Word read and proclaimed, and fill us with understanding and with the desire to change. Speak Lord! Your people listen! Amen.

“Shake the Dust From Your Feet”

Back in June I went to Portland for a few days to attend a continuing education event on behalf of the presbytery. I won't go into details because they aren't important, but suffice it to say it was not a good experience. In fact, it was a failure, and I felt like a bit of a failure when I left, which is not a good feeling. Too bad I didn't remember the advice tattooed on one of the attendees calves: “shake the dust from your feet”, the tattoo read. *Shake the dust from your feet.*

It goes without saying that if we live long enough and attempt to do things in our lives or make something of our lives, we will surely encounter failure. People fail every day. People fail in relationships, fail at work, fail in school, fail at succeeding in something they've given their time and energy to. Who here can identify with failure?

You know who else can identify with failure? Jesus. Jesus experienced failure many times. When he went home to preach in the synagogue in which he'd been raised, his friends- the people who saw him grow him up- asked him to leave because they didn't like what he said.

When Jesus exorcised the demons from Legion, the townspeople there asked him to leave because they didn't like what he did. *We heard that story a couple of weeks ago.* Just before today's story, Luke reports that a group of Samaritans were very hostile to Jesus and refused to give him a place to stay.

And when we meet up with Jesus today, he's on his way to Jerusalem, where he'll be rejected and killed.

I think it's OK to say that Jesus met his fair share of hostile people; he didn't win over everyone; there were rejections along the way.

So is it any wonder, then, that he counsels the 70 people gathered before him that they will experience the same thing? “You will be like lambs among wolves,” he tells them. There will be people who do not accept your peace. There will be people who will not welcome you. When that happens, *shake the dust from your feet and move on.* Jesus makes it clear that his followers will not be insulated from rejection or failure just because they are going in his name. And because he knows what that rejection and

failure will feel like, he provides his disciples with a means of dealing with it: shaking the dust off their feet.

Now I realize that none of us likes to hear we are going to have to face disappointment or rejection in life. But understanding that Jesus and his disciples supported one another in the face of failure can empower all of us to carry on when we fail.

Because failure can be an opportunity to learn. I think we forget that sometimes in our success-oriented world. We forget that failure can be creative when it jolts us from our safe and stale routines. A great failure can be just the influence we need to encourage us to risk and change. I can remember in my resume for this position talking about my previous position and saying about that job, "We celebrate our successes, and learn from our mistakes," which is a tagline that I still use when talking about my work here, because not everything I've done here has been a success; there have been failures and mistakes and regrets; but I consider all of them to be learning opportunities.

In a recent issue of Atlantic Monthly magazine, there was an article about how important is it for parents to let their children fail so that they can learn from their mistakes and grow into confident adults who can shake the dust from their feet when they fail. The article makes the point that when we keep our kids from failure, we rob them of the opportunity to learn from their mistakes, to develop resilience and the ability to bounce back, to feel confident taking risks and to face problems with strength and courage.

What's more, we actually do our children a disservice when we lead them to believe that everyone wins, or that things always work out — neither of which is true. Psychologists say that instead of facing obstacles with creative solutions, regularly rescued kids learn to avoid them, which can increase anxiety and depression when they have to rely on themselves down the road.

The positive lessons failures teach us can take a childhood, or even a lifetime, to learn.

As Theodore Roosevelt said, "Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumphs even though checkered by failure, than to rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy nor suffer much because they live in the gray twilight that knows neither victory nor defeat" (From Knute Larson, "Dancing With Defeat," Leadership, Fall 1993, 104-107).

Failure is not the end of the world. Failure is not a debilitating disease that ruins us for eternity. In fact, we should not be afraid to fail. We should expect failure at times. And when we experience it we should exercise Jesus' ritual of failure - shake the dust and move on.

See, here's the thing: we can't let our failures get the best of us. We can't let them define who we are. And believe me, I speak from personal experience here. It's easy to let the failures and everything that goes with them contaminate us, which is why Jesus gave the advice he did.

It was an old tradition in the Middle East to shake the dust off one's feet, because travelers would often arrive with their feet caked in dust and hence foot washing was quite common.

But Palestinian Jews made this a theological and sacred issue. They believed that any land outside of Israel was defiling, and therefore they were to "shake off" any dust or dirt from outside lands when returning to Israel so it wouldn't contaminate the holy land.

It's with this mindset that Jesus tells the disciples to shake the dust from their feet; and not because he's worried that it will literally contaminate them; but worried more that it can metaphorically contaminate them because rejection and failure are hard. Rejection and failure can work their way into our psyches and discourage us and immobilize us.

In a recent sermon on this passage and just that idea, Nadia Bolz-Weber, who's an author and Lutheran pastor who's off-the-wall in a good sort of way, sort of like a younger Ann Lamott, talks about her own discouragement and says that when she fails and is rejected, she becomes obsessed with her naysayers, her failures, and her rejection and thinks about them way too much. *It's a feeling I can relate to. She says, "It's like I rent out free space in my head to them. Free rent for a hostile tenant."*

But, she says, "Jesus had some crazy things to say about all of that (in today's reading): like if someone does not share in peace that our peace actually returns to us, and how Jesus said that if we are rejected we should just kick the dirt from our shoes . . ."

In other words, in the face of failure and rejection, "don't rent out free space in your head to them (the naysayers), the ones who reject you, kick off the dust" and move on.

Harder said than done, I know. But Jesus moved on. Jesus moved on from his naysayers and didn't let his rejections define him or his mission, which was establishing the kingdom of God here on earth. If he had let his naysayers and failures define him, I'm not sure he would have made it all the way to Jerusalem. I think it's quite possible that over time that dirt would have turned to mud and he would have gotten stuck in place, and that place of being stuck would not have been the life giving place of the cross.

So put failure in its proper perspective and move on. Whatever the failure, whether personal or in relationship with others, there are times we must commit the thing to God, leave it alone, and move on to a place that is life-giving and does bring peace.

Amen.

Sources:

1. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2013/07/sermon-on-what-a-lousy-idea-it-is-for-other-people-to-be-the-source-of-our-peace/>
2. <http://www.today.com/moms/bright-side-blunders-why-we-should-let-kids-fail-1C8775302>

3. http://s3.amazonaws.com/dfc_attachments/public/documents/3160939/Mark_6_S_hake_the_dust_off_your_feet_and_carry_on.pdf
4. <http://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/01/why-parents-need-to-let-their-children-fail/272603/>