

Theology of Failure

A white, torn-paper-like border runs along the bottom edge of the page, starting from the left and extending towards the right, with a jagged, irregular edge.

Failure

- How do you feel when you hear the word?
- How have you identified it in your past?
- When you encounter it, what do you do?

Success



- What would you define as successful ministry?
- What do you feel when you see churches succeed where you don't?
- How do I deal with not being successful?

Jesus as our Model

“Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him.”

John 13:16



What did Jesus model?

- From multitudes to no one
 - Ridicule, skepticism
 - Persecution
 - Death???
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- How would Jesus rate according to our metrics of success?

The Suffering Servant, Isaiah 53:1-3

“Who has believed our message...?”

“He was despised and rejected...

“Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.”

What Christian models of leadership would believe this message?



Anne Lamott and the Creative Journey

“Thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds written that he’d had three months to write, which was due the next day. We were out at our family cabin in Bolinas, and he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. ***Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother’s shoulder, and said, “Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.”***”

Excerpts from Maria Popova, “Anne Lamott on Writing and Why Perfectionism Kills Creativity,” The Marginalian.org, 2013.11.22

Perfectionism

“Perfectionism is the voice of the oppressor, the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life, and it is the main obstacle between you and a s****y first draft.”

Anne Lamott

Failure and Responsibility

- Failure is not always bad
- Learning from organizational failures is anything but straightforward.
- Organizations need new and better ways to go beyond lessons that are superficial (“procedures weren’t followed”) or self-serving (“They just weren’t ready for our great new idea.”)

*Gretchen Gavett, “When We Learn From Failure (And When We Don’t),”
Harvard Business Review, 2014.05*

Failure and Fault

- How can we respond constructively to failures without giving rise to an anything-goes attitude?
- If people aren't blamed for failures, what will ensure that they try as hard as possible to do their best work?

Peace in Failure

- We need a culture that makes it safe to admit and report on failure.
- Failure can coexist with flourishing and excellence.
- How many mistakes in your church are truly blameworthy?
- How many mistakes are TREATED as blameworthy?



- Ministry is inherently uncertain.
“We walk by faith and not by sight.”
– 2 Cor. 5:7
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- To put the pressure on ourselves that everything must be successful in such an uncertain environment is oppressive and counter-productive!
 - We need to be familiar with constantly encountering unforeseen obstacles and challenges. It is the nature of ministry.
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- Spotting big, painful, expensive failures is easy. In many organizations failures are hidden or overlooked as long as it's unlikely to cause immediate or obvious harm.
- The goal should be to surface it early, before it has mushroomed into disaster.
- How can we identify different kinds of failures and respond to them accordingly?

Although an infinite number of things can go wrong in organizations, mistakes fall into three broad categories:

- preventable
- complexity-related
- intelligent

Encouraging Intelligent Failure

Sim Sitkin, Duke University, Professor of Management

- Intelligent Failure occurs when experimentation is necessary: when answers are not knowable in advance because this exact situation hasn't been encountered before and perhaps never will be again.
- Intelligent Failure is NOT “trial and error” because that implies that there was a “right” outcome in the first place

Amy Edmondson, “Strategies for Learning from Failure,” Harvard Business Review, 2011. 04



A hand is shown in silhouette, holding a bright, glowing orb. The background is a soft, warm sunset or sunrise with a large, bright sun or moon in the center. The overall mood is hopeful and serene.

Re-Thinking Failure in Light of the Resurrection

“I have told you these things,
so that in me you may have
peace. In this world **you will
have trouble**. But take heart!
I have overcome the world.”


John 16:33

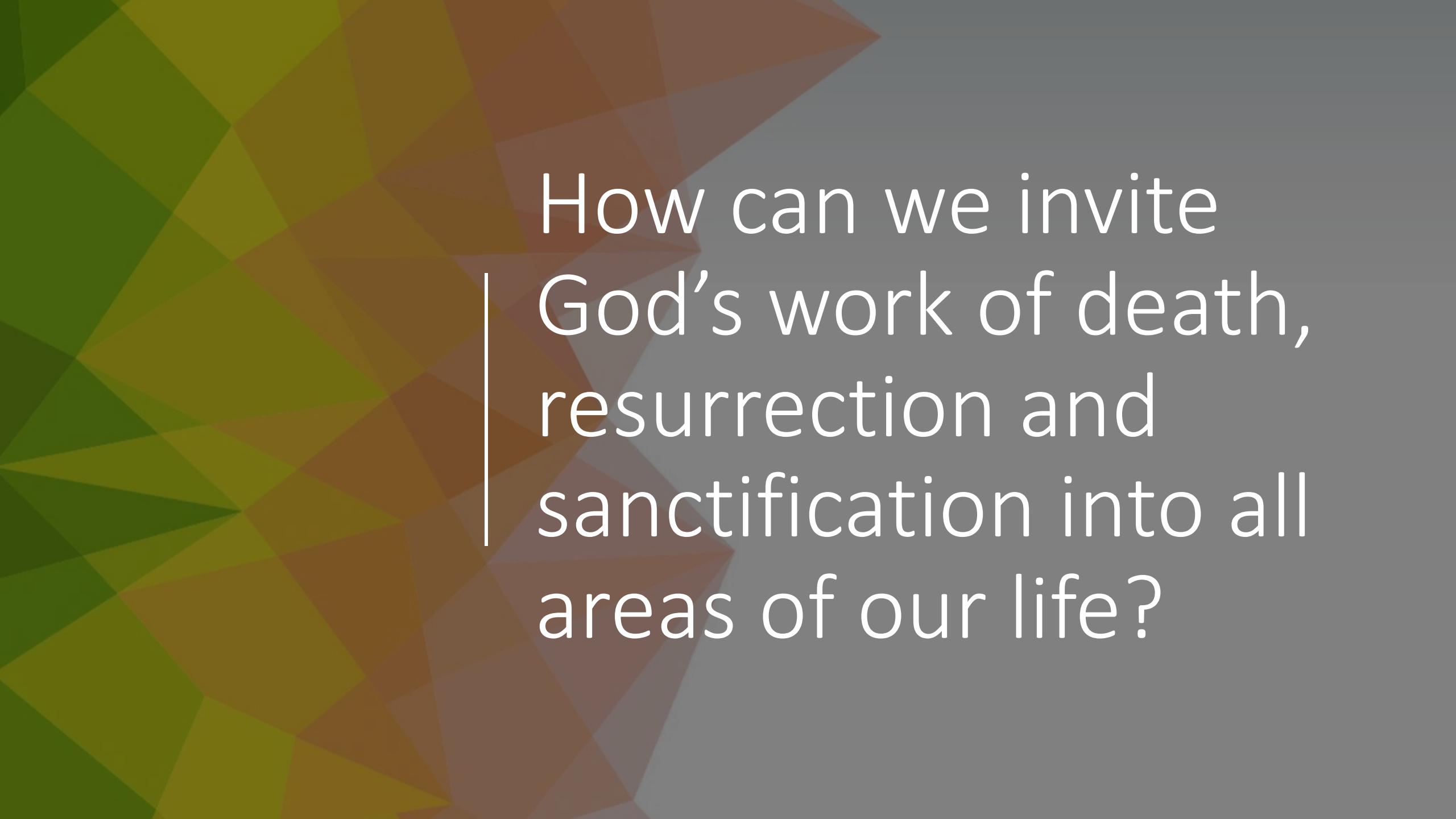


An ongoing process

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.”

2 Corinthians 4:16

- We are in a constant cycle of rising from our failures to discovering a resurrection.
 - This constant renewal forward is the theological understanding of *sanctification*.
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How can we invite
God's work of death,
resurrection and
sanctification into all
areas of our life?

Questions and Reflections

