**March 18, 2018**

**John 12:23-36; Hebrews 5:5-10**

We are coached into believing that we should be successful in life. We are given trophies for participating, and certificates for small accomplishments. In my high school, seniors voted on a dozen superlative titles to bestow on each other. There were titles that everyone wanted, like “best dressed” and “most athletic,” and there were titles that no one wanted like “most studious.” To receive such a title would be the recognition that the world considered you a nerd. Well, guess who won? 😊 To be fair, I was only given that title because the girl who *actually* won the most number of votes refused the title, so they gave it to me, the runner up. I succeeded in failing to win the one title that no one wanted. (For the record, I now believe that it was a great honor, and I encourage all people in the lifelong pursuit of nerd-dom, for that will bring more education and more opportunities at every age.)

In school, there are social stigmas attached to every little thing. The clothes you wear, the lunch you bring (or buy), the people with whom you eat, the grades you earn, the way you get to and from school, even the type of pencil you use. Very small things can become quite significant in assigning people value and purpose and belonging. They may even become ways to classify someone as a success or failure.

Success or failure is often determined by our ability to keep pace with our herd. For students, that is clearly the progression from grade to grade in each successive year. To be held back or skip a grade is the stuff of legends. The comedian Tig Nitaro repeated 8th grade three times, watching her friends graduate and go on to high school without her. She was horrified as she grew older and taller, yet was trapped in school with younger and shorter students. As she railed against the system, repeatedly put in detention, isolated from community and education both, she thought about the absurdity of her situation, and finally decided that she had had enough. In a self-admitted Hollywood kind of moment, she actually stood up from her detention desk and said with authority, “I’ve had enough. I’m going to head home now.” Tig never returned to school. She never graduated high school, and still regrets that she didn’t drop out of school sooner. A failure of our educational system, a failure of her support systems, a failure in her family, that could have been the end of Tig Notaro. She could have died of embarrassment, or let that be the end of her dreams. Instead, she found lifelong success in publicly, gently, and wittily sharing her continued failures with the world. When she was diagnosed with cancer, she incorporated it into her comedic routine. When her mother died unexpectedly young, she made her family’s story into a tv series. Each failure and death (literal or metaphorical) brought new life and new opportunities to Tig. Because she pursued the failures. She sanctified each death. She stirred her life’s soil and in doing so, brought healing and hope and humor to others around the world. She even said, “Not many people have had as much bad luck as I have, but not many people have had as much good luck either.”

There is a *catch-22* between success and failure, living and dying. Failures and deaths often force us to reckonings with ourselves. We replay the events over and over, wondering what we could have done differently. What was the weak link? What was the contributing cause? We learn more about the surrounding issues, reading experts and consulting friends. We go out of our way to make sure it doesn’t happen again. But we don’t usually respond the same way to our successes. We don’t stop to reflect; we take our victory and run. Even though we don’t really know *why* we won. We don’t think about the factors that led to a successful end. And because of this, failure often teaches what success does not. When we are mindful, and when we don’t get trapped, failure itself becomes a success.

Priest and author Richard Rohr reminds people that we are born to failure. There is no escaping that we will ultimately fail at living; we will all die. And even though we know that, even though we watch the rest of the world lie and die, we spend much of our lives wrestling with our own ending. We try to make life into one big success story – happiness and rainbows every day, straight As, popular amongst our peers, minimal work with maximum income, and wonderful vacations. We can’t help but push ourselves toward success in large and small ways each day. So we feel sad when things don’t go as planned. We grow restless, and feel empty and conflicted. We get angry and despair and feel a variety of “failure” emotions. Rohr wrote that these experiences work for good within us. They push us to grow and mature and become a fuller version of ourselves. “There is a necessary suffering to human life, and if we avoid its cycles we remain immature forever… All of these have the potential to either edge us forward in life or to make us dig in our heels even deeper, producing narcissistic and adolescent responses that everybody can see except us. **We either fall upward, or we just keep falling**.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

That is going to be my new bumper sticker. “It’s your choice: fall upward, or just fall.”

Jesus tells the disciples here that “unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” He spoke of his own dying, which would bring new life to the world, and I think he spoke of the work of the church in the world. We are called to sacrificial living. We are called to forego worldy “success” – money and rainbows and glitter and the like – and sacrifice ourselves instead. We are called to love God and our neighbor, whereas the world tells us to love only ourselves. We are called to humility and generosity and compassion, whereas the whereas the world tells us to look out for only ourselves. To be a Christian is to follow Jesus, and to follow Jesus is to do the works that he did, to feed and tend his sheep, to testify on his behalf. And according to the world’s standards, none of these things will earn a college degree or money in your retirement or fashionable clothes or any of the other marks of success. All of these Jesus things will instead lead a person to pour themselves out for friend and neighbor and stranger. They will lead us to give without hope of receiving, to understand without being understood, to love without being loved in return. These Christian successes will lead us to **fall upward**.

In the fourth century, a young British man was brought to Ireland against his will and forced into slavery. For six years, he worked as a shepherd in the Irish countryside and became a Christian there. Although Patrick escaped from slavery and returned to Britain, a piece of his heart stayed in the place that had once been his prison. He returned to Ireland (by choice) to spend the majority of his adult life serving people who had once been his oppressors. He made enemies out of church officials and the Roman government. He was persecuted. Friends and members of his congregation were martyred. He was tested beyond what he thought he could endure. And yet, at the end of his life, he wrote, “I am Patrick the ignorant sinner... I am a stranger and an exile living among barbarians and pagans, because God cares for them… I have traded in my homeland, my family, and my very life for them – even if it means my death.” [[2]](#footnote-2) Patrick failed in many of the world’s marks of success. He sacrificed everything, and in doing so, he left a miraculous legacy for generations to come – around the world! Patrick **fell upward** in his life.

The western and northern hemispheres are in the midst of a religious revolution. Church attendance has diminished. Membership is not replenishing itself, and Christians around the world are panicking. We know for ourselves on Long Island that there is a common fear amongst Presbyterians that we are all just holding on by a thread. We spend many hours and meetings thinking and talking and praying about how we can stay alive. We try new programs. We tweak committee structure. We are all practically standing on our heads trying to find the *perfect* solution that will bring success. We dream of families pouring in our doors. We hope for full Sunday School rooms. We yearn for fresh volunteers. We wish for full bank accounts. Financial numbers, attendance numbers, all the world’s marks of success. Especially after our conversation last week, when we considered our own quickly changing *numbers*, I wonder what would happen if we changed our approach. Instead of holding on to the little bit that’s left in our cup, I wonder what would happen if we poured ourselves out. What would happen if we **fell upward**? What kind of fruit would we bear if we opened ourselves to the sacrifice Christ invites?

Generally speaking, Jesus called the disciples to a whole way of being. A sacrificial lifestyle. Not a sacrificial moment, or a sacrificial day, or a sacrificial mission project. Jesus was asking for their whole minds and bodies and selves to let go of themselves in order to bear fruit. To walk away from their families in order to spread the Gospel. To talk to and touch people they would normally avoid in order to love them and care for them. To baptize sinners in order that they might grow the community. A group of people who became community by admitting their failures. People who found new life in death. This is the success Christ sought.

It’s not too late for us to make a sacrifice. It’s not too late for us to change our way of thinking and being and doing. But it will be **sooo** hard for us to let go of the need for success. What choice do we have? We either fall upward, or just fall. It will take great trust for us to be willing to die in order to find new life. Let us pray that Christ will move us and inspire us to lay down our lives for his.

1. Rohr, Richard. Loving the Two Halves of Life. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Patrick. “Letters to the Soldiers of Coroticus” from Philip Freeman’s Saint Patrick of Ireland, pg 169. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)