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SADLY LIKE THAT MODEL TRAIN

John 18:15-27

Baseball’s spring training is underway. The Padres got off to an ignominious start by being humiliated in their first 2 spring training games by, of course, the evil empire to the north, the Los Angeles Dodgers. This was, to say the least, a disappointing beginning since the Padres are trying to get rid of the stink of 2023. As you surely are aware one year ago expectations for the Padres were higher than they had ever been for a Padre team. They were the talk of Major League Baseball. Many national experts were picking them to go to the World Series. It was understandable, for they had spent prodigious sums of money to build what in the estimation of nearly everyone was an all star roster. It was unprecedented for a Padres team that throughout their history have been one of the most miserly teams in baseball. The season that followed was stunning. For most of the season that team showed an uncanny and remarkable tendency to fail in clutch situations. Until the last 3 weeks of the season their hitting in crucial situations was the worst in baseball. They had the worst record in close games in all of baseball, and they came within an eyelash of setting a record for losing extra inning games. All this despite having a payroll of $256 million, the third highest in baseball. Having said all that, by pretty much any measure the Padres were an epic fail last year.

No one likes failing. Last year while backing out of a parking space in the garage down below I had a close encounter with one of the concrete columns. It left an ugly scar on the side of our car. It felt like everywhere I went that scar was mocking me. Thomas Edison said, “I have not failed. I have only found 10,000 ways that don’t work.” Maybe so, but that big scrape on the side of the car said, “No, you failed.” Today we are going to look at an historic failure and see if we can find some hope in the face of humiliating defeat. Let’s look at John 18:15-27.

PETER FAILED BEFORE HE FAILED

I have had bad days in which I can’t seem to do anything right and keep messing things up. Sometimes, though, I have days that are bad because a number of unpleasant or bad things happen to me. There have been bad days that combine both my messing up and bad things happening to me. Peter was likely the most mercurial of Jesus’ disciples. He certainly appeared to have been the most vocal and became the most visible leader of the early Jesus movement. There is a great deal to admire about Peter. He often displayed great courage and loyalty to Jesus. However, as we will see today, at the most critical moment of Jesus’ life Peter had not just a bad day, but a disastrous weekend. His horrible weekend included both some egregious failures and some terrible events that caused him deep pain.

The heart of this passage focuses on Peter’s most notorious failures. We will look at that shortly, but Peter had repeatedly messed up before these historic failures occurred. Peter’s unfortunate list of errors began earlier in the evening. The first is recorded in Luke 22. In that chapter Jesus instituted what we call Communion as an illustration of what he was about to do. He told them he wanted them to always be reminded of the sacrifice he made for us when they ate and drank. Jesus was giving them a picture of the horror that was going to happen to him the next day.

In that context it is sad to read what was on their minds. Jesus is about to be tortured, mocked, humiliated, and finally executed in the most painful way the ancient Romans could dream up. Verse 24 tells us what the disciples were doing on the eve of that horrific event. “A dispute also arose among them as to which of them was considered to be the greatest.” They were arguing over who was the most important and were maneuvering for position. Peter was a part of that argument. Jesus addressed that ludicrous discussion by reminding them that he himself was there to serve and telling them that the greatest among them should be servants of all. In verse 31 after telling them they need to be servants Jesus said, “Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift all of you as wheat.” He particularly singled out Peter. Perhaps that was just because Peter was the most vocal leader, but I suspect Jesus spoke specifically to him because he had likely played a central role in the dispute that had just taken place. That was Peter’s first failure that night, but it was not the last.

After that incident Jesus took his men to the Mount of Olives. He went there to pray. Matthew 26:36 tells us that he asked Peter, James and John to accompany him a little ways from the rest of the group. Verse 38 says Jesus told the 3 of them, “My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me.”

Jesus’ followers didn’t know the full extent of what was about to happen, but they knew things were ominous and Jesus was deeply grieved and apprehensive about what was about to happen. He needed them to stick with him and be a support in that awful moment. He went a short ways away to spend time praying. Verse 40 says, “Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. ‘Couldn’t you men keep watch with me for one hour?’” But notice who that question was directed to. The end of the verse says, “he asked Peter.” Once again, Peter seemed to take the lead in failing.

I, unfortunately, can relate. I have told you before that a memorable moment happened on Laurie’s and my honeymoon. The last week before our wedding was crazy busy and filled with lots of emotion because we were so excited. Our wedding took place at 8 o’clock at night because that was the only slot open at our church. As you can imagine, we didn’t get to our hotel until late that night, and given the festivities of our first night as husband and wife, we didn’t get much sleep. We were booked out on an early morning flight to Hawaii the next morning. So we had a long travel day. We made it to Hawaii, but we were light years beyond tired. Then you have to add the time difference. We were really tired for the first few days we were there and were dealing with the fact that our bodies were still on Pacific time. All of which explains why the first night we chose to pray together in the living room of our honeymoon condo, I had Laurie pray first, and while she was praying I fell asleep. She finished and waited for me to pray, only to be greeted by silence. She said, “Couldn’t you keep watch with me for 5 minutes.” The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak. So it was for the 3 disciples.

That was unfortunate, but it got worse. Jesus told them to watch and pray, then he went away to pray some more. Guess what he found when he came back the second time. They were sound asleep again. He repeated his admonishment to watch and pray. He went away and prayed again, and that third time, as you’d expect after failing twice they did better. Oh, wait, no they didn’t. Once again they were out cold. Jesus said to them, “Are you still sleeping?” Peter and the other guys at this point had piled up a fairly decent list of failing. But Peter most definitely was not done.

The prayer and sleeping session ended just in time for Jesus to be confronted by the horde of armed men who had come to arrest him as we saw last week. Peter decided to try to make up for his failures by failing in an even more impressive way. Seeing that huge mob of armed men, Peter took out his sword and tried to cut off the head of one of them.

This was tactical insanity. There were a couple of hundred armed men, the majority of them trained Roman soldiers. Exactly how was Peter going after one of the men with a sword going to help? The most likely result of his outrageous action was a massacre. The expected response to an armed attack like that was to fight back in kind. That would have meant the disciples would likely have been wiped out and Jesus most likely would have been killed as well. There was a miracle that occurred that night, but I’m not talking about Jesus healing the ear of the victim of Peter’s assault. The miracle was that the mob didn’t fight back. It was a miracle that Peter survived his unwise attempt to defend Jesus.

However, the tactical failure was not the biggest problem. Peter had just spent a couple of years learning from Jesus. Had he listened to anything Jesus said? In Matthew 5:43 Jesus had said, “Do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also.” Peter was confronted by a person intent on doing evil. Jesus said, “Don’t resist him.” Peter said, “Off with your head.” His response was definitely one of resisting. In Matthew 5:44 Jesus had said, “Love your enemies.” Peter was hardly loving the guy whose ear he cut off. In Matthew 5:9 Jesus said, “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.” It is hard to see how attacking someone with a sword could be classified as being a peacemaker.

Peter had repeatedly seen Jesus threatened by the forces of nature and by other people, and in every instance Jesus’ power had protected him. But that night Peter figured it was up to him to protect Jesus. He thought he could do it better than Jesus could. His heart was in the right place. His loyalty and his commitment were beyond question at that moment. But this was an egregious failure both of faith in Jesus and in obedience to all that Jesus had taught.

PETER WAS A SERIAL DENIER

John tells us that Jesus was first taken to the high priest. They actually first took him to Annas, who was a former chief priest and was the father in law of the current chief priest, whose name was Caiaphas. Apparently Annas was kind of the power behind the throne. The position of chief priest was in a pretty sad state at that point. The Romans were in control of Judea and they decided who the rulers would be, including the chief priest. By this point in history the situation had degraded to the point where the Romans pretty much awarded the position to the highest bidder.

John also tells us that Peter and “another disciple” followed Jesus when the arresting party took him to stand before Annas. The other disciple was John himself. John knew the high priest, which explains a little detail that confirms the trustworthiness of John’s eyewitness accounts. Malchus was the name of the man that Peter attacked. He is described as a servant of the chief priest. All 4 gospels include accounts of the assault. John is the only one who identifies the victim by name. That is likely because he was the only one who knew him personally.

As a friend of the chief priest John was allowed into the courtyard while Peter was left outside. John went to the servant girl watching the gate and asked her to let his friend, Peter, in, which she did. The servant girl thought she recognized Peter as one of Jesus’ disciples. She said literally, “You are not also one of this man’s disciples, are you?” Pay attention to the word also. Also in addition to whom? To John, whom the servant girl knew was a follower of Jesus. Peter denied even knowing Jesus. Peter had insisted to Jesus that even if everyone else failed him, he, Peter, never would. John had followed Jesus and didn’t hide the fact that he was a disciple of Jesus, and Peter, the guy who would always bravely stand up for Jesus, is now cowering before a servant girl as John watches in dismay.

No doubt Peter was afraid if he admitted who he was he might join Jesus in standing trial. His fear would have been magnified by the fact that he had tried to kill Malchus. If it became known that he was one of Jesus’ disciples, it was not hard to imagine that someone would connect the dots and identify him as the disciple with the sword. That would make his situation seriously worse. In fact, verse 26 tells us there was, indeed, a relative of Malchus there that night who thought he recognized Peter as the perp with the sword and accused him of being the attacker.

A little later another servant girl also thought she recognized Peter as one of Jesus’ men. This time Peter was even more vociferous in denying any connection to Jesus whatsoever. Some time later another person, the relative of Malchus, hearing Peter’s Galilean accent, thought that suggested that Peter was one of the band from Galilee, a follower of Jesus. This time Peter used some swear words to deny even more emphatically that he knew Jesus.

Matthew 26:31 tells us that earlier that night Jesus had told the men that night they would all run away, which turned out to be true. Peter responded in verse 33, “Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will.” Ouch. That didn’t turn out well. Jesus accurately prophesied, “This very night before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.” Peter said in verse 34, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.” Talk about having to eat your own words. Peter sadly fulfilled Jesus’ prophecy to the letter.

Luke 22:60 says that as Peter was denying any connection to Jesus that third time a rooster crowed. Verse 61 says at that point, “The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word the Lord had spoken to him, ‘before the rooster crows today, you will disown me three times.” Verse 62 says he went outside and wept bitterly.”

IMPLICATIONS

OUR GOOD INTENTIONS OFTEN LET US DOWN

I feel bad for Peter. We have an expression that describes something giving out weakly. When our grandsons, Wesley and Hunter, stayed with us for a couple of days recently, Wesley’s favorite toy he wanted to play with was my old HO gauge electric train. He loved that thing. We set it up to run around an oval track, and Wesley wanted to let it keep running endlessly. However, the train engine is more than 65 years old. I don’t understand exactly what the problem is, but after it has been running continuously for a long period of time it starts slowing down. I know that happens with humans who are over 65 years old, but it seems curious that an electric train would also have that happen. I told Wesley, “We need to turn it off and give it a rest because it is petering out.” It’s that expression that makes me feel bad. To Peter out is to give up. That expression was derived from this incident in Peter’s life. Two millenia after the event Peter, who was a giant in the history of Jesus’ church, is a symbol of failing. His name is associated with giving up.

Peter did so many great things. He was one of Jesus’ closest friends. His name was actually Simon, but Jesus gave him the nickname Peter. He gave it to him because it means “Rock.” So really his nickname was Rocky. Sometimes a nickname is so appropriate it sticks and is the name people know a person by. My senior year in high school I sometimes talked our coach in letting me pitch batting practice. My teammates actually liked it when I pitched because I was so hittable. I had a terrible arm and threw a fastball that was fast in name only. It more accurately could have been called a glacial ball because it moved so slowly. Flies could land on mit on its way to the plate. My teammates gave me a nickname. They called me Super Slow after that absurdly slow velocity. That eventually was shortened to Super, then to Sup. From then on no one called me Rick or Myatt. Even the coach called me Sup. That’s what happened with Simon. He was called Rocky, Peter, by everyone.

Jesus said of Peter, “Upon this Rock I will build my church.” But he was not a rock that night. He was a quivering glob of Jello that melted when the heat was on. He could not have imagined that he would ever do such a thing. Peter truly believed he was ready to die for Jesus. He had shown that he wasn’t kidding. When Peter whipped out his sword that night he had to have known he was embarking on a suicide mission. He knew it would end badly for him, but that didn’t stop him. He was committed to Jesus to the end. At least he thought he was. He was, right up until Jesus was on trial and people started saying, “Hey, you’re one of that guy’s disciples aren’t you?” For some reason, at that point he folded like a beach chair. He was as solid as a wet paper bag. He didn’t just fail once. He did it 3 times!

We don’t know why he was willing to stand firm and take an extreme, though unwise, risk one minute, then totally fell apart later that same night. Maybe his action of assaulting Malchus with a sword caused him to realize if he admitted who he was it not only was possible that he might end up standing trial alongside Jesus, it absolutely certain that he would be charged with attempted murder. Whatever the case, all that brave talk earlier in the evening now merely added to his guilt. I have no doubt it did him no favors in the eyes of his fellow disciples. They were surely thinking, “What a blowhard. Hey, Peter, how’s that ‘Even if everyone else fails, I never will’ thing working out for you?”

When I was in high school there was a guy on our baseball team one year who thought he could do no wrong. He was a decent player, but not nearly as good as he thought he was. He was kind of immature and constantly bragged of his exploits. When he got a hit or even made a routine play in the field he was sure to magnify it. If a teammate made an error, he would let them know all about it. When he made a mistake or failed he always had excuses, explanations for why it wasn’t his fault. It all backfired on him. I wouldn’t say that most of us on the team hoped he would fail, but there was a certain glee when it happened, and when he started trying to trot out excuses there was a lot of smirking that went on behind his back. I wonder if there wasn’t something similar after Peter’s humiliating crumble.

It is important to remember that Peter fully intended to be totally loyal to Jesus no matter what happened and totally believed he would never do anything but show absolute commitment. He was certain of that down to the core of his soul. This serves as a warning to us. We, too, go through life with lots of good intentions. The cliché of New Year’s Resolutions should serve as a reminder to us that being absolutely determined that we are going to do some good thing, we are going to do better in some way, then somehow having our determination dissipate like the morning marine layer in a matter of weeks is a common human characteristic.

In Philippians 3:3 Paul said of believers in Jesus like him that we are those, “who boast in Christ Jesus and who put no confidence in the flesh.” Putting confidence in the flesh is believing if we just put our minds to it, if we just try a little harder, if we make up our minds and are determined we can do it, we can manage to make ourselves holy and approved by God. It makes no sense, because if that were true then Jesus didn’t need to come into this world and suffer rejection, torture and execution. He just needed to exhort us to try harder. That, of course, is what religion typically does.

One of the things I have come to realize over many years of ministry is that a great deal of what passes for teaching in the church, for “discipling” people, boils down to urging people to have better intentions, to bear down and try harder, to just being more disciplined in doing the right things. It almost becomes a religion of good intentions and resolutions and pulling oneself up by the bootstraps. What that does is set us up for the same thing Peter experienced, a colossal collapse at what really matters.

What Peter’s unfortunate and humiliating collapse should do is remind us that what makes us beloved by God, what makes us holy, is not our herculean efforts to do better, but what Christ has done for us. It is trusting in him, and not ourselves. We should be humble about the reality that our good intensions will not take us very far, but that Christ’s work is more than sufficient for our need.

OUR FAILURES WILL PRODUCE PAIN

Knowing our fallibility and the weakness of our best intentions, why should we not just quit trying to be the best that we can be? Why stress about trying harder to do God’s will, given that we know we will fall short and we know that we are not loved by God because of our efforts but because of his grace in Christ? Why not simply embrace our failings, cruise through life and enjoy the ride?

Again we need to pay attention to Peter’s experience. We have to take note of what happened when he failed. How do you think he felt about that? We don’t have to guess. Luke 22:62 tells us. When that rooster crowed after Peter’s last ignominious a profane denial of Jesus, Jesus looked right at him, and Peter went out and “wept bitterly.” He didn’t just shed a tear or two. He was crushed. The guilt just buried him. Here is what I know about that. His grief over that failure was not a momentary thing. We know he never forgot it. He had to live with the guilt, the humiliation and the sorrow over that for the rest of his life. He got past it, but it never went away.

Here’s how I know that. Recently I had a tiny skin cancer spot cut out of my left cheek. The spot was so small I figured it would make take a stitch or two to close up the surgical wound. Boy was I wrong. I was shocked at how long the dermatologist spent stitching it up. I started thinking, “Just how big is this scar going to be?” It was much bigger, much longer than I expected. Even after it healed there was a noticeable knot where I guess he tied off the sutures. Laurie was helpful. She said, “I had a knot like that when I had my scar but it has pretty much gone away. I can still feel it, but you can’t see it.” That was encouraging, except she brought up her scar, which provoked an unpleasant pulse of guilt. She had a scar on her face because of my mistake, a story you’ve heard before. Almost 20 years ago when we were helping Carissa move while she was in college, due to my mistake a bungee cord slipped loose, fired back and hit Laurie just below her eye. What an awful night that was. I still shudder and feel the guilt of that terrible experience 2 decades later, even though Laurie forgave me. I will never forget it. And Peter never forgot his awful failure either.

We will regret every moment we choose to disobey or dishonor God. There will be consequences from it, and one of them will be the kind of regret Peter experienced. Read Psalm 51 some time. David had disobeyed God in some way, and in verse 3 he wrote, “I know my transgressions and my sin is always before me.” That disobedience haunted him and nagged at him. In verse 12 he prayed, “Restore to me the joy of your salvation.” He needed it restored because it was gone. The simple truth is that if you want peace and joy, the best way to have it is to seek always to do God’s will. If you want lack of peace, sadness, guilt and regret, a great way to get it is to do your own thing and rebel against God.

GOD’S GRACE IS GREATER THAN OUR FAILURE

I think Luke 22:31-33 is one of the most poignant and hopeful sections in the Bible. Jesus said in verse 31 that Satan had asked to sift Peter and the disciples like wheat. Have you ever sifted anything? I have a recollection of sifting from my childhood. There was a hill outside of Bakersfield that my dad once took Jerry and me to when we were boys. He had this sort of box that had a wire grid on the bottom. It was a sifter. We would dig shovels full of dirt and dump them in the sifter. Then we would shake it back and forth. The dirt would fall through the wire grid and what would be left would be rocks and other solid items. We actually came up with some sharks’ teeth in that sifter. The hill was called Sharktooth Mountain because for some reason there were lots of shark teeth buried there from a time when that area was actually an ocean bottom. You can’t go there now because it has been learned that it is infested with Valley Fever spores. Why did Jesus talk about sifting Peter and the others? Because Satan was going to shake them the way we shook that sifter. He wasn’t looking for sharks’ teeth. He was looking to destroy their faith.

Look at what Jesus said next. “But I have prayed for you, Simon, that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers.” Jesus prayed that Simon’s faith wouldn’t fail. That night could have been cataclysmic for Peter. It is easy to hear what Satan would have been whispering in his ear. “Oh, yeah, you’re a great follower of Jesus. You are such a coward. You have no faith. At the first sign of a test you’ll fold up your tents just like you did when Jesus most needed you.” There was great opportunity for Peter to be ruined forever. But Jesus prayed for him. His prayer would be answered, and Jesus knew it. Notice he didn’t say, “If you turn back.” He prayed, “When you have turned back.” Jesus knew, because he prayed for him, that Peter would survive this. He would return to faith, loyalty and commitment to Jesus. And Jesus said the same role he’d had would be waiting for him. He’d still be a leader, a rock they could count on. He would still strengthen others in their faith in Jesus.

Jesus knew all about what Peter was going to do that night. He knew about it before he ever asked Peter to follow him. He knew Peter was going to fail in multiple ways at the most critical time, but that changed nothing. He still loved him, chose him and used him in a powerful way. And the same is true of us. Before you were ever born God knew all about everything you would be and do. Psalm 139:16 says to God, “Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.” God knew all about our worst failures long before we were even infants. Psalm 139:3 says God is familiar with all our ways, and verse 4 says, “Before a word is on my tongue, you, Lord, know it completely.” God knew all about your worst moments before he ever called you, just like he knew all about Peter’s worst moments on that awful night.

Recently we had dinner with Michael and Carissa and their two boys. The boys were remarkably well behaved all during that meal, and we talked about how they are showing signs of growing up. Carissa surprised me when she said, “If I were 5 years younger I’d want to have another baby.” She is now at an age where having another child would be rather risky. The big surprise for me was that she would even say such a thing because for her, pregnancy was a brutal experience. It was just awful. But there is another aspect of why I found that a little surprising. Any of you who have been parents know that no one can prepare you for the shock of having your first child. Yes, it is an incredible, beautiful thing when that baby is born. But then you have to take it home and care for it. You have to go through those early months where the child seems totally committed to making sure you never get sleep. You are exhausted beyond anything you have ever imagined. And the child cries incessantly. You change diapers constantly. You never know quite what to do. It does get better, but then your child gets old enough to exert his or her will. They discover the joy of throwing a tantrum, often over such earth shaking issues as wanting to wear their airplane shirt instead of their dinosaur shirt on a given day. Or perhaps it is because you insist they need to eat some nutritious food instead of marshmallows for dinner. You know that some day the tantrums will go away, but you will at some point have a teenager who knows everything and is embarrassed by the fact they have parents, an unfortunate reality that they do everything they can to hide from their friends.

I get why people have that first child, for the idea of having a baby is exciting and beautiful, and the fact is, no new parent really understands what is about to hit them. What astounds me is that people, more often than not, have subsequent children. They do it with their eyes wide open, knowing exactly what is coming. They love those kids despite all the crying, the mountains of poopy diapers, the tantrums, the lovely experience of having your child be ashamed of you. They have those subsequent children knowing they’re going to do all of that, and they love them anyway.

God knows all about all of our foibles, flaws and failures. He has always known. None of it is a surprise to him. He didn’t choose us because we’d finally get over them or because we didn’t have very many. He chose is simply because of his grace. He loves us with all those warts, none of which are hidden from him. Our failures change nothing in our relationship with him. Yes, we all fall short. We all stumble. We all fail. And God says, “When you have turned back, strengthen your brothers and sisters.”

Don’t you love Peter? He is the poster child for failing, but also for God, in his mercy, grace, love and wisdom, having a good plan and a future for his fallible child. Never forget that in Christ, God loves you as his child, and nothing will ever change that.