

“When Your Best Isn’t Good Enough”

Isaiah 6:1-8

Luke 5:1-11

Have you ever felt that you have done your best at something and it didn’t prove good enough? I can only imagine that’s how Dr. Dean Richardson and his skilled team of veterinary doctors and nurses felt a few days ago when they had to euthanize Barbaro. For eight months they labored long and hard, with all the knowledge God had given them, but their best wasn’t good enough.

You know that feeling, don’t you? You study hard and cram for the exam as best you can, only to do poorly, if not flunk it. Perhaps you give 150% of yourself in the work place only to see others promoted who spend more time at the water cooler than at their desk.

You work hard in building good relationships with your friends when all of a sudden, inexplicably things go sour. The Psalmists often prayed to God for help in dealing with their enemies, but the enemy in the 55th Psalm is particularly oppressive because, **“This isn't the neighborhood bully mocking me — I could take that. This isn't a foreign devil spitting invective — I could tune that out. It's you! We grew up together! You! My best friend!** It just made no sense, especially as he remembered **“those long hours of leisure as we walked arm in arm, God a third party to our conversation.”**¹

Maybe you’ve spent hours and hundreds of dollars in marriage counseling and you do all you are told to do and more and still, the marriage ends up in divorce court.

Maybe as parents you are inspired by the old Proverb: **“Train children in the right way, and when old, they will not stray.”**² I’ve known couples whose parenting skills I have envied. They did everything right only to see a son or a daughter choose some destructive path for their life.

Then there was the time that Simon Peter and his crew fished the Galilean waters all night long and brought back nothing, not even a minnow! You can’t pay that family bills that way! Hundreds of years earlier, one of God’s prophets lamented, **“I have worked, but how hopeless it is! I have used up my strength, but have accomplished nothing.”**³ Surely Peter felt that way as well. Just because your story is told in the Bible doesn’t exempt you from such feelings. How do we handle them?

Be prepared by being aware of the possibility. Frustration and failure are facts of life. Mark Townsend is a priest in the Church of England. He recently published a book called, *The Gospel of Falling Down*, highlighting the beauty of failure in an age of success. “This is a self-help guide to life,” he writes, “with a particular emphasis on how to make sense of the brokenness and failure in our lives ... We hear a lot about the gospel of success ... but most of us are more accustomed to failure, or at least not reaching our hopes...”

When your best isn't good enough, *perhaps* you should try again, though not necessarily! Remember one definition of insanity is "doing the same thing over and over again expecting different results every time." Peter did try again, but he did so in obedience to Jesus. Maybe he felt it was a dumb idea. He knew more about fishing than Jesus, but Jesus already had shown he knew more about life. Jesus was not someone whom Peter could ignore. So he let out the sails again and went to deep waters. The catch was overwhelming.

Sometimes, we are aiming for the wrong goals so we shouldn't try again. Then it is better to move on. When Jesus sent out his disciples to proclaim the Gospel, he prepared them for possible rejection and said that if that happened, they should shake off the dust from their feet and go elsewhere.⁴

Perhaps the best way to combat feelings of frustration when our best proves to be not good enough is to lower our sights, that is to become more comfortable with the reality that we do not live in a perfect world and that nothing is perfect. So stop looking for the perfect form of government, the perfect church, the perfect marriage, the perfect child, the perfect job, the perfect YOU. They don't exist.

I realize there is some danger in such thinking. It could tempt us into believing that doing our best really isn't important. But it's really a matter of balance. In his eulogy of Gerald Ford a few weeks ago, Henry Kissinger said something helpful at this point: "The great contribution of President Ford was that he managed to strike a balance between the American temptation toward perfectionism and the absolute, and the temptation to abandon everything because one cannot have the perfect and the absolute."⁵

We don't live balanced life. Perfectionism is one of those demonic *ism's* that has us in its clutches and robs us from the fullness of life which Jesus wants to give us. It's one thing to do our best, it's another thing to be obsessed with perfection. Our best is always less than perfect. How many times have we heard that Babe Ruth had 714 career home runs, but he also had 1330 strike outs?! "Don't let the fear of striking out hold you back," the Babe said.

But our children are increasingly paralyzed by the fear of striking out and we, our whole society are to blame. Listen to one commentator:

Stress can complicate the life of a young over-achiever. One "B" spoils an otherwise perfect report card. A fraction of a second takes away first place. A misspelling leads to defeat. And we're disappointed, maybe more than the kids.

Over-involved parenting may start innocently enough, when kids show an interest in gymnastics or cello, softball or swimming and we want to see how far they can go. So we run them to years of lessons and practices, write endless checks and then wonder why the coaches don't see what we see.

And if they want to quit? No way. Sometimes we rationalize the pressure for straight A's or record-setting performances because we see their potential – and maybe they're just not trying hard enough. But we may be raising a generation of kids who think the world revolves around them, lack empathy and can't handle failure. And when a teacher, coach or boss fails to heap praise on them, they may turn into emotional marshmallows.⁶

I know of one second grade teacher who has had to deal with irate parents because little Suzie did not get a perfect score on a quiz, as if that would diminish her chances of being accepted at Harvard. One counseling service insists that living your life as a perfectionist sets you up for continuous rejection and self-putdowns-and deny your peace of mind – because demanding perfection usually results in failure.⁷

Are you a perfectionist? Gordon Flett, a professor of psychology in Toronto identifies **Ten Top Signs You're a Perfectionist**

1. You can't stop thinking about a mistake you made.
2. You are intensely competitive and can't stand doing worse than others.
3. You either want to do something "just right" or not at all.
4. You demand perfection from other people.
5. You won't ask for help if asking can be perceived as a flaw or weakness.
6. You will persist at a task long after other people have quit.
7. You are a fault-finder who must correct other people when they are wrong.
8. You are highly aware of other people's demands and expectations.
9. You are very self-conscious about making mistakes in front of other people.
10. You noticed the error in the title of this list.

There are times when *good enough* is enough – when a “B”, or maybe even a “C” is enough, if it represents your capabilities and you have made an honest effort. For some students, “track 3” is enough while pursuing honors would be way too much. First Presbyterian Church of Ambler is no Crystal Cathedral, but honestly, would we want it to be? St. Paul considered himself to be the least of the apostles because he once persecuted the church. **“But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain.”**⁸ By the grace of God this congregation is what it is and God's grace to us has not been in vain.

Someone has said “it is not in climbing the ladder of perfection that we meet God, but in falling from it.” Enter Isaiah, one of God's prophets. Presumably he was a decent guy but one day while in the Temple he has an unmistakable experience of God's presence. He didn't play the role of Little Jack Horner who said, “Look, what a good boy am I!” No. Instead, we hear: **“Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips...”** In a similar vein, when Peter and the others had to haul in that big catch of fish, he didn't boast as if he won the lottery. No. Instead, we hear: **“Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man.”** Knowing that you are in the presence of God has that kind of effect on a person. It's not because God wants us to grovel in our sin, but God wants us to remember **“that**

the Lord he is God: it is he that hath made us, and not we ourselves ...”⁹

It’s hard for some of us to understand that. About 40 years ago a psychologist named Milton Rokeach described his attempts to treat three patients at a psychiatric hospital in Ypsilanti, Michigan, who suffered from delusions of grandeur. Each believed he was the messiah, called to save the world. Rokeach’s treatment was going no where. He decided to put the three into a little community, to see if rubbing against people who also claimed to be the messiah might dent their delusion. He reported on one interesting conversation. One of them said, “I’m the messiah, the Son of God. I was sent here to save the earth.” “How do you know?” Rokeach asked. “God told me.” One of the other patients piped up, “I never told you any such thing.”¹⁰

The world is filled to overflowing with people who have such delusions of grandeur about who they are and what they might be able to do. They are the ones who like to climb the ladder of perfection. Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the great theologians of the last century, gives a reality check on such thinking:

Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true, or beautiful, or good, makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, could be accomplished alone; therefore, we must be saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint; therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness.¹¹

Similarly, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who was assassinated in 1980 for advocating God’s kingdom and justice, wrote the following poem:

It helps, now and then, to step back
and take the long view.
The kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a tiny fraction of
the magnificent enterprise that is God’s work.
Nothing we do is complete,
which is another way of saying
that the kingdom always lies beyond us.

No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith.
No confession brings perfection...
No set of goals and objectives includes everything.

That is what we are about.
We plant seeds that one day will grow.
We water seeds already planted,
knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything
and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.
This enables us to do something,
and to do it very well.
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a stop along the way,
an opportunity for God's grace to enter and do the rest...¹²

We cannot do everything, but each one of us can do something. And by the grace of God, it will be good enough!

1. Psalm 55:12-14 (*The Message*)
2. Proverbs 22:6 (NRSV)
3. Isaiah 49:4, *Good News Bible*
4. Luke 9:5
5. *Newsweek*, January 8, 2007
6. January 16, 2007, in the *Pantagraph* - Bloomington, Illinois (See [Pantagraph.com](http://www.pantagraph.com))
7. <http://ub-counseling.buffalo.edu/stressperfect.shtml>
8. 1 Corinthians 15:10
9. Psalm 100:3 (KJV)
10. *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*, Milton Rokeach, 1964
11. Source unknown
12. Quoted by Brian McLaren in *The Secret Message of Jesus*, (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2006), p. 205-206.